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Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037 202-223-2942

Volume III, Number 1 January 1989

The War on Drugs
Covering the Debate Over Drug Abuse

How have the media covered the war on drugs? To find out, we examined policy-related stories on illegal drugs in national media outlets. We monitored the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *Newsweek*. The coverage totalled 290 television stories, and 207 articles in the *Post*, 41 in *Time*, and 24 in *Newsweek* - 562 stories in all.

Major Findings

■ **Use or Abuse** - When drug use was debated, one source in six defended or accepted the use of currently prohibited drugs. *Page 3*

■ **Losing the War** - Stories criticizing failed policies outnumbered those praising successes by a three to one margin. *Page 4*

■ **Roasting the Reagans** - Four out of five evaluations of President and Mrs. Reagan's role in the war on drugs were negative. *Page 5*

■ **TV's Bad News** - On TV news criticism of the war on drugs outnumbered praise by an eight to one margin, compared to a three to two negative margin in print. CBS broadcast more criticism than ABC and NBC combined. *Page 5*

■ **Advice and Dissent** - The policies discussed most frequently followed a conservative agenda - expanded police and military operations and stiffer sentences. But the criticisms seen most often reflected a liberal perspective - the need to spend more money and to focus on the social and economic causes of drug abuse.

Media Monitor (Copyright 1989) is a monthly publication of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

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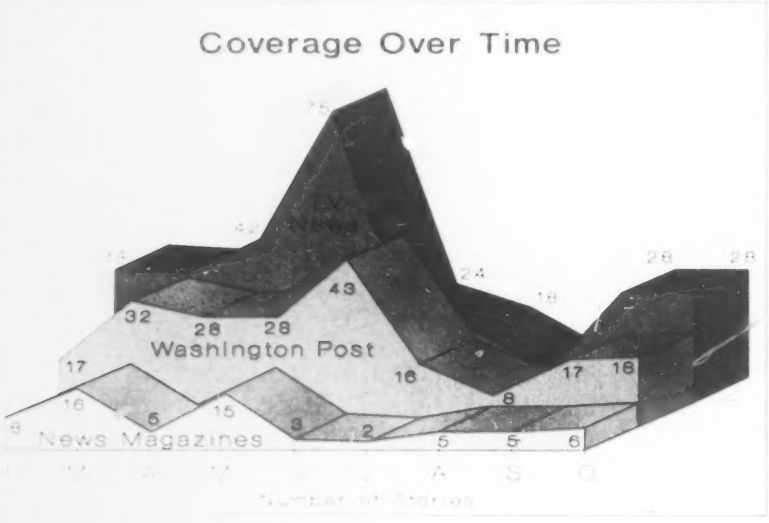
Drug Watch

We monitored national media coverage of the war on drugs from January 25 through October 31, 1988. The study period began with President Reagan's State of the Union address. It concluded as the presidential campaign neared its culmination. During this time drug abuse became the subject of an ongoing policy debate in Washington, an election debate waged across the country, and international disputes with Latin American nations like Panama, Mexico, and Colombia. In the process the drug problem became the focus of intense public concern. As the election neared, drugs were named as a leading topic of concern in public opinion polls.

The tide of the battle has turned, and we are beginning to win the crusade for a drug-free America.

- Ronald Reagan
Time, 3/14



This nine-month period featured heavy media coverage - 290 stories on the network evening newscasts, with a combined airtime of 7 hours 25 minutes; 207 *Washington Post* articles covering 3708 column inches; and 65 articles in *Time* and *Newsweek*. While the networks ran nearly identical numbers of stories, coverage in the news magazines diverged sharply - 41 stories totalling 1146 column inches in *Time*, compared to only 24 stories and 498 inches in *Newsweek*.

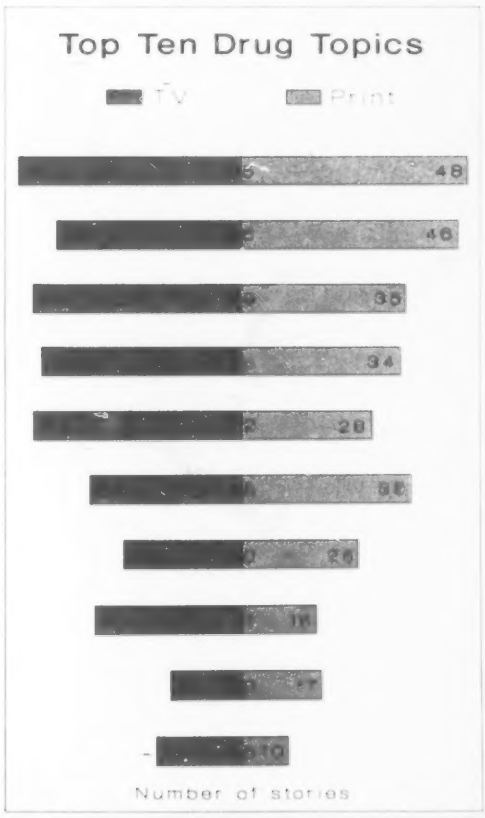
The coverage peaked during the spring (especially on television), fed by reports of the administration's stepped-up rhetoric, disclosures about Panamanian dictator General Noriega, and the continuing election debate. After dipping sharply during the summer, media attention surged in the fall, fueled once again by campaign politics. The debate over drugs was one of the top five policy issues covered on television news throughout the 1988 campaign. In addition, the drug issue made the top 10 list of topics covered on TV news during 1988, even after excluding reports that treated drugs in the context of other major stories, such as the election, Panama, and crime news (*Media Monitor* 12/88).

Buying drugs is as easy as going to an Avon or Tupperware party.

- Drug counselor,
Washington Post, 2/28

The Line on Drugs

The drug debate overlapped a variety of news genres - crime, politics, international relations, even civil liberties (e.g. drug tests). Amid the policy debate and official pronouncements, however, the media focused on the human drama and tragedy associated with drug abuse.



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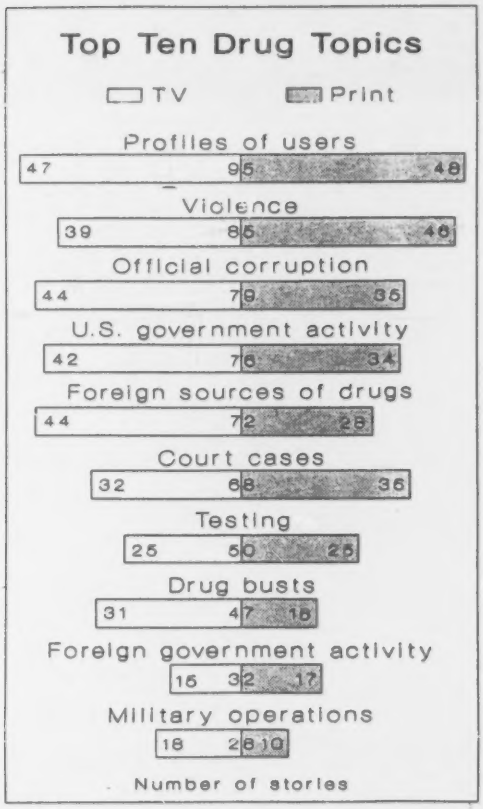
Correction to graph on page 2.



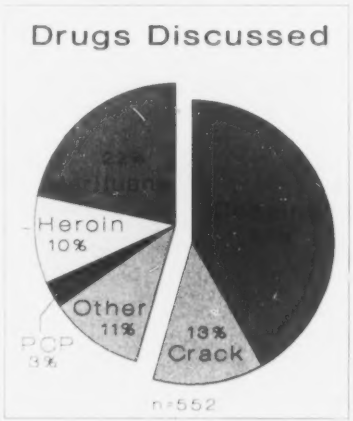
The demand for drugs, often featuring profiles of drug users, was the most frequent topic of news reports in both television and print outlets. The violence associated with drug use and the criminal underworld surrounding it came in a close second, followed by official corruption, especially in Central and South American countries involved in drug production and transportation. The activities of federal agencies involved in the drug war, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Coast Guard, and the FBI, also provided a steady steam of stories. Other staples of coverage included drug-related litigation, the debate over drug testing, arrests of dealers and "drug lords," and use of the military to cut off the inflow of drugs.

Television's heavier focus on drug busts, international trafficking, and military operations reflects the medium's need for good visuals. Network camera crews could accompany agents on interdiction missions or use official film of such efforts to produce action-packed stories. But one charge often levelled at television did not pan out this time. TV did not stress violence any more than print outlets did, since the violence associated with drug dealing (and double-dealing) normally took place out of camera range.

We have more drugs on the street than we've ever had in the history of the United States.

- Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), NBC, 2/29

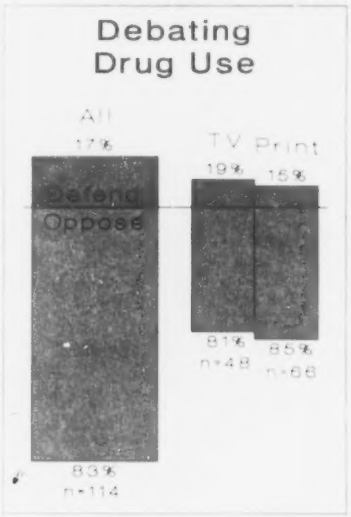
Drugs of Choice



News about drugs in 1988 was preeminently news about cocaine. A majority of all drug mentions concerned either cocaine (233 stories) or its derivative "crack" (73 additional stories). Marijuana and hashish provided a strong secondary focus (119 stories), especially after the Reagan administration's zero tolerance policy cast greater attention on users of "recreational" drugs. Only 52 stories mentioned heroin. And PCP, the source of rising alarm some years back, attracted a mere 19 stories, only one of them on television.

Drug users profiled on television tended to fall into two demographic camps -- poor inner-city blacks addicted to crack or heroin, and middle- or upper-status suburban white users of cocaine or marijuana.

Debating Drug Use



While most sources debated strategies for winning the war on drugs, some questioned whether this battle should be fought at all. One source in six (17%) either defended or would accept the use of currently illegal drugs. Defenders of drug use got their best hearing on TV news -- 19% support, compared to 15% in print outlets.

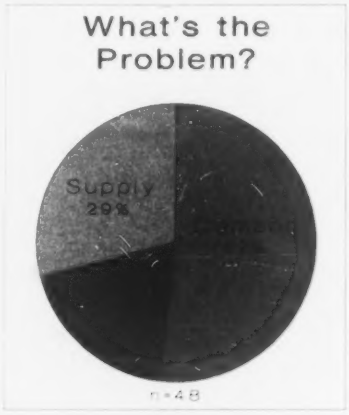
Some sources limited their support to "recreational" drugs. A more inclusive view appeared after Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke called for legalizing prohibited drugs. For example, *Time*, (5/30) quoted Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz: "We've already decriminalized two drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Now it's time to decriminalize a third, heroin." The same piece also cited economist Milton Friedman: "The harm that is done by drugs is predominantly caused by the fact that they are illegal."

Almost no one, however, defended drug sellers. One exception was convicted smuggler Carlos Lehder Rivas, who called cocaine trafficking "a revolutionary weapon against North American imperialism."*Washington Post*, 5/20.

Supply Siders

Those who agreed on the need to eliminate illegal drugs split into supply- and demand-side camps. Supply-siders focus on halting the manufacturing or influx of drugs. Sample: "The greatest threat to our security in this hemisphere is not the Sandinistas. It's this avalanche of drugs that is pouring into this country." - Michael Dukakis, CBS, 8/21.

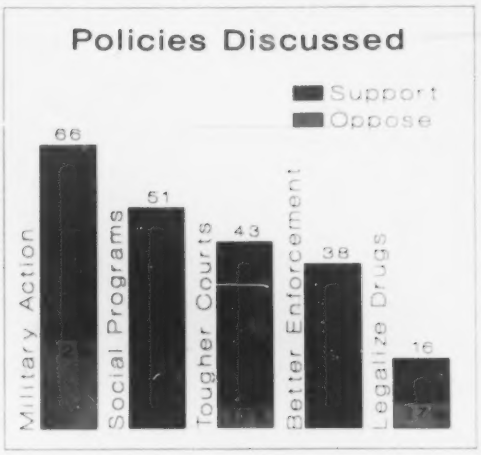
Demand-siders stress the importance of changing societal mores or getting users to "just say no." Sample: "Drugs are like quicksilver. They flow to wherever there is an opening...If the demand is there, the stuff is going to come in." - Pentagon spokesman, *Washington Post*, 5/13.



In 1988 the demand-siders won the battle for public attention. Such unlikely allies as Jesse Jackson and Nancy Reagan provided a majority (52%) of source comments on this issue, compared to only 29% who called cutting off supplies the top priority. The remaining 19% asserted that both approaches were necessary.

To legalize drugs would give us a vast army of people who are out of control.

- Mitchell Rosenthal, *Time*, 5/30



There was no opposition to the next most frequently cited option (51 mentions), which was private or government-supported social programs to provide more education, job training, or drug treatment for addicts. Calls for tougher sentencing of drug offenders (43 mentions) also featured only token opposition (12%). And no one opposed the 38 pleas for improved enforcement of drug laws, by hiring more police, equipping them better, increasing prison space, etc. Other than military activity, the only well-publicized proposal to elicit opposition voices was legalization. Of 16 sources who took a position on legalizing drugs, 63% supported the policy change and 37% opposed it. Among the critics was DEA head John Lawn, quoted in *Time* (5/30): "Drugs are not bad because they're illegal. They're illegal because they're bad."

We have legalization of drugs now, because people are not being prosecuted.

- Customs Official, *Time*, 5/30

Policy Options

Despite the emphasis on reducing demand, the policies debated most frequently in the media concerned military action to cut off the supply of drugs. Proposals included increased air and sea patrols and eradication of drug crops in Latin America. Of the 66 sources who weighed in on this topic, two-thirds (68%) supported an expanded military role. Among the naysayers was a RAND Corp. expert on ABC (5/18): "Neither the military nor any other interdiction agency can make smuggling risky enough...to make a difference..."

Losing the War

Current federal policies in the war on drugs found few defenders in the national media. The success or failure of existing efforts was the underlying theme of 69 stories on the drug problem. Our coding went beyond the views of individual sources to take into account elements of language and style that provided the story itself with a kind of viewpoint.

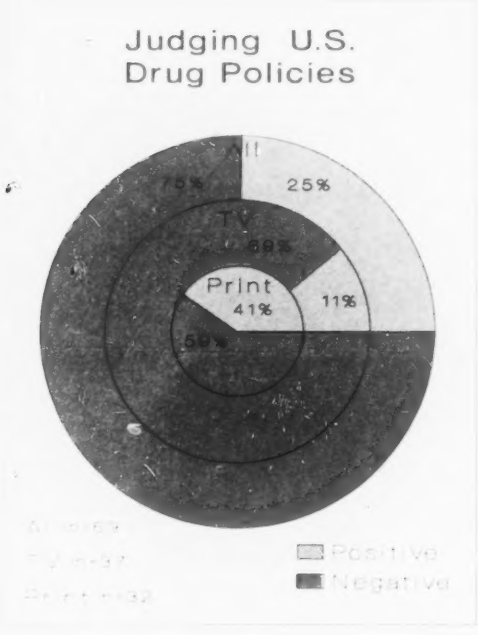
The result: Stories whose point was to criticize policy failures outnumbered those praising successes by a 3 to 1 margin. For example, the

administration's zero tolerance policy was roundly criticized as unworkable or quixotic. The *Post* (6/22) quoted Congressman Gerry Studds (D-Mass.), "There was a strong bi-partisan consensus that rationality had left the scene and there isn't a semblance of balance, fairness, or reasonableness in the policy. You don't go around harassing innocent citizens."

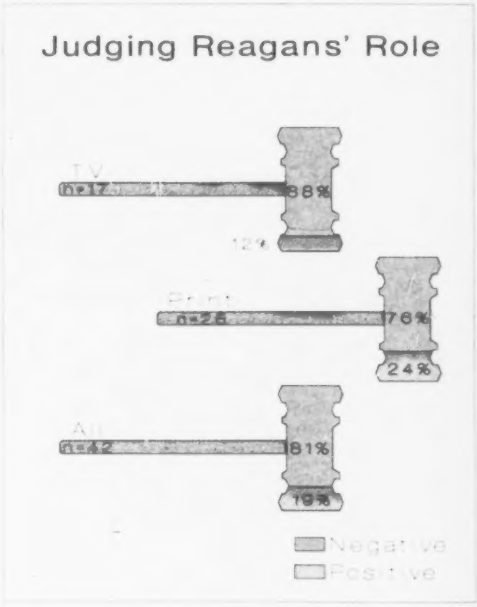
By far the sharpest criticism of U.S. policy came on television, where negative stories outnumbered positive ones by a margin of 8 to 1 (89% negative). By comparison, the margin in print articles was 3 to 2 negative (59% to 41%). On CBS (7/13), for example, a representative of the Drug Policy Foundation indicted the administration's supply-side efforts: "Marijuana use has gone from being almost a non-crop to one of the leading cash crops in the country, worth between ten and thirty billion dollars a year." And on ABC (3/1), Rep. Larry Smith (D-FL) complained: "They (the administration) tell people to say no to drugs, and then they can't say no to the dictators and other people in other countries that they know have been involved."

How was it that in 3 years a network Washington set up to run arms to the contras wound up running cocaine into this country for the most vicious drug cartel in the world, at the same time we were supposed to be fighting a war against drugs?

Richard Threlkeld, ABC, 4/7



The same pattern of overwhelming criticism characterized evaluations of President and Mrs. Reagan's personal efforts in the war against drugs. We coded 42 comments that were directed specifically toward the Reagans or the "Reagan administration" or policies identified with them personally (e.g. the "Just Say No" campaign). Four out of five (81%) evaluations were negative, and support appeared only half as often on television as in print (12% vs. 24% positive comments in the broadcast and print media, respectively).



Thus, the *Post* quoted Jesse Jackson on April 16, "The Reagan administration's efforts against drugs have been a failure and a disgrace." By contrast, a February 29 *Post* article quoted Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY), chairman of the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, "If we didn't have Nancy Reagan we wouldn't have anything." On television, the only sources to praise the Reagans' efforts were members of the administration or other Republicans. More typical of assessments over the airwaves was that of New York mayor Koch on CBS (2/29): "We are truly in a war with the drug pushers, but the president is not acting as the commander in chief. If anything, he's acting like a wimp."

For many people, drugs are a way of life, and 'just say no' is a joke.

- Noah Nelson, NBC, 5/16

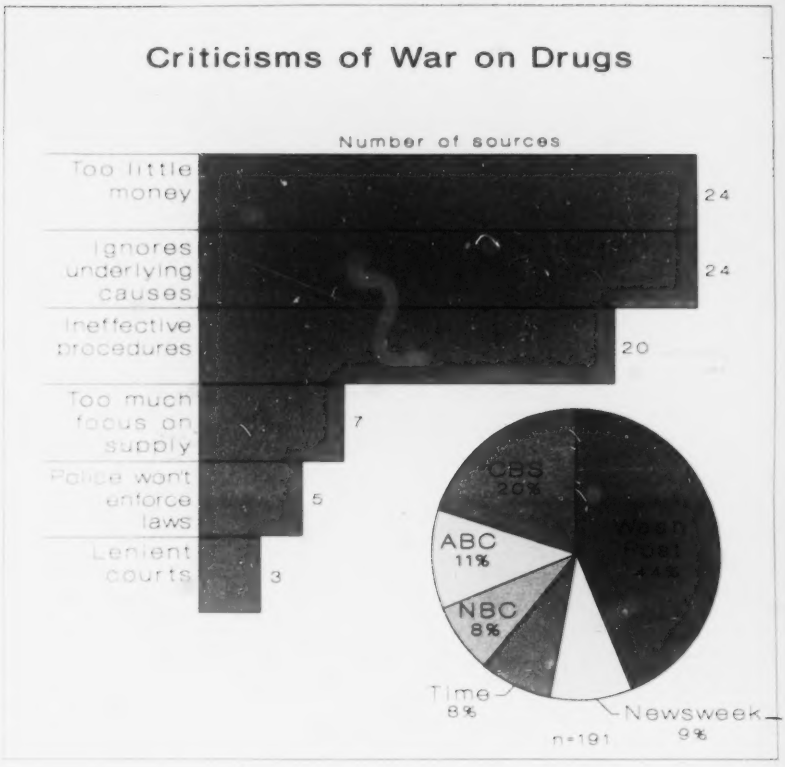
To illustrate how strong the tide of policy criticism was on television, recall that 19% of televised sources defended or accepted the use of currently illegal drugs. Thus, drug use was supported more frequently than the Reagan administration's policies to halt it.

What Went Wrong?

Overall, 191 sources offered criticism of how the war on drugs has been waged. If reports on policy options followed the administration's conservative philosophy (military involvement, more police, stiffer penalties) media-borne criticism led with the liberal agenda.

The criticisms seen most often (tied with 24 mentions apiece) were complaints of inadequate funding and arguments that current policies ignored the deeper social and economic causes of drug abuse. For example, *Time* (5/9) quoted one medical expert on drug abuse, "Just saying no doesn't cut it. The poor ask, 'What can we just say yes to?'" In the *Post* (6/3), Jesse Jackson advisor Roger Wilkins went further: "There are no economic opportunities (in urban ghettos) other than drugs, and people do what they have to in order to survive."

CBS broadcast more critical statements (38) than the other two networks combined (35). Similarly, *Newsweek* managed to publish more criticism than *Time*, despite publishing fewer than half as many column inches on the subject.



Taking Issue

Death to Drug Lords?

The only thing (drug lords) fear is death itself. ...Let them be on the end of that fear for a change.

- Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Shoot those drug barons down and machine gun the survivors.

- Rep. Arthur Ravenel, (R-SC), ABC, 6/15

The United States ought not be in the business of taking lives.

- Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Capital punishment is our society's recognition of the sanctity of human life.

- Sen. Orin Hatch (R-UT), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Zero Tolerance

It's not any less illegal to possess a marijuana cigarette than it is to possess a ton of marijuana.

- U.S. Marshal, *Washington Post*, 5/10

It just doesn't make any sense. Y'know, it's not like living in America, ...it's like living in some kind of totalitarian country.

- Boat owner, ABC, 5/9

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Exit Reagan . . . Enter Bush

TV News Coverage of the Presidential Transition

Has George Bush enjoyed a media honeymoon since election day? To find out, we examined nearly eight hours of Presidential transition coverage in the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news between the election and the inauguration (November 9 through January 19). This month's *Media Monitor* compares coverage of the incoming Bush administration with earlier newtwork coverage of candidate Bush.

Major Findings

- **A Kinder, Gentler Media** - During the general election, evaluations of Bush on TV news were 2 to 1 negative. During the transition, evaluations were 2 to 1 positive. But most non-partisan sources remained critical of Bush. *Page 3*

- **The New George Bush** - Comments on Bush's campaign were 89% negative, but judgments of his actions as President-elect were 94% positive, and predictions about his presidency were 65% positive. *Page 3*

- **Bush vs. Brokaw?** - Bush's press was 80% positive on CBS and 68% positive on ABC, but only 48% positive on NBC. *Page 3*

- **A New Dan Quayle?** - Quayle's press was nearly as good as Bush's (62% positive), and even better than Bush's among non-partisan sources. *Page 4*

- **Reagan's Mixed Reviews** - Bad press outweighed good press on President Reagan by 52% to 48%, including a 2 to 1 negative margin among non-partisan sources.

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Transition Coverage

We monitored all stories on the Presidential transition that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news between the election and the inauguration (November 9 to January 19). The coverage totalled 277 stories lasting nearly eight hours (474 minutes). ABC led the coverage with 103 stories and 161 minutes. NBC was next in airtime with 134 minutes across 81 stories, while CBS aired 93 stories that lasted 119 minutes.

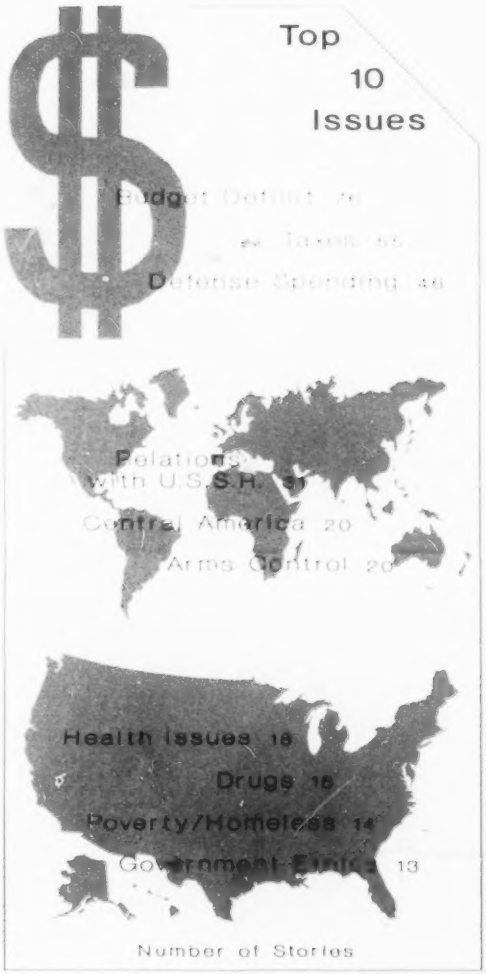
(Bush's) biggest problem - Quayle as Vice President...A veteran Republican operative described Quayle as 'emotionally immature, with a short attention span...'

-Tom Brokaw
NBC, 11/9

The Issue Agenda

What a difference election day makes. During two and one half months of general election coverage, crime was the top issue raised on the nightly network newscasts. The topic of 142 election stories from late August to early November, crime was mentioned in only five stories on the transition, during a similar time period. Conversely, the top-rated policy issue during the transition was the budget deficit, which barely made the top ten list during the campaign.

Issue coverage during the transition generally reflected the potential for future controversy more than current policy concerns. The exception to this trend was the budget deficit. It generated by far the heaviest coverage, as a source of both immediate concern and future contention. The deficit was portrayed as an issue that would test Bush's relations with the Democratic Congress, as well as his abilities as a manager.



Economic issues dominated early coverage of the incoming administration's policy debate, as stories on taxes ran second only to coverage of the deficit. Other economic issues were usually covered in relation to the deficit. The question of how Bush could balance the budget without raising taxes popped up frequently, along with Bush's "read my lips" sound bite on tax increases. The only major event-driven issue coverage came from Soviet leader Gorbachev's visit to New York and U.S. recognition of the PLO in December. These events boosted coverage of US-Soviet relations and Middle East policies, respectively.

Labels

During the 1988 campaign, candidate George Bush was labelled ideologically 20 times on the network evening news--15 times as conservative, 3 times as moderate, and twice as liberal. That's three times as many conservative as non-conservative labels overall. Since the election, though, he has been termed moderate once, "pragmatic" twice (this term was not included in our other totals), and conservative not at all.

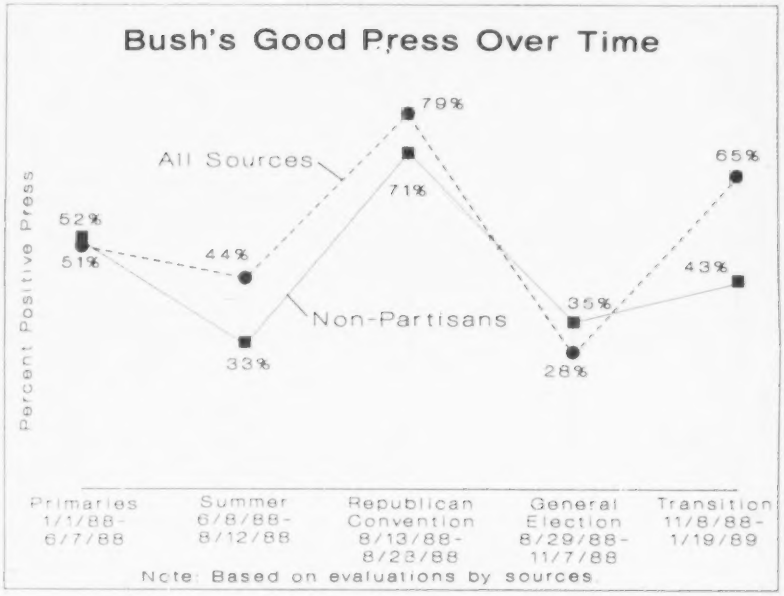
Overall, labels of the new administration have been about evenly divided. We counted two "liberal" tags, eight "moderates," and 11 "conservatives." Reporters themselves accounted for two-thirds of these, splitting 14 moderate and conservative labels. The unexpected "liberals" were Jack Kemp (so labelled by an NAACP official) and OMB chief Darman. "Moderate" labels were spread among Darman, Brady, Baker, Thornburgh, and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft.

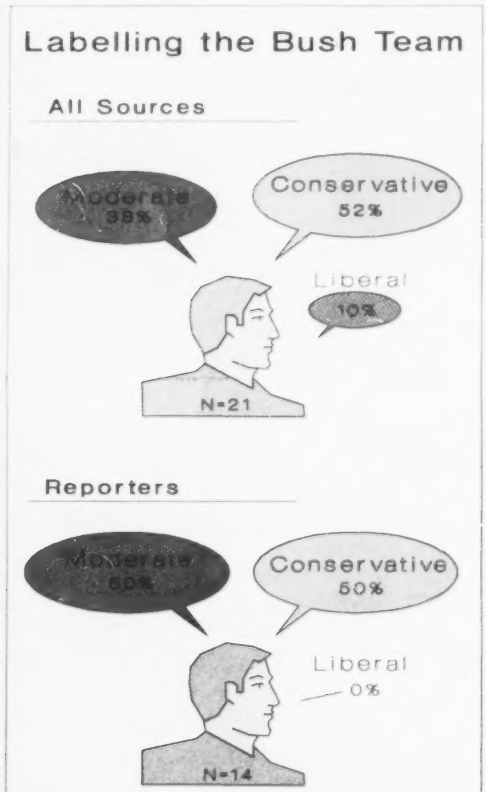
John Sununu emerged as the appointee most frequently labelled a conservative. He accounted for 7 of the 11 labels, including the only two labels suggesting membership in the far right (Sample: On November 17, Dan Rather called Sununu "a champion of the hard right."). Others labelled as conservative included Dan Quayle, Elizabeth Dole, and William Bennett.

Media Honeymoon?

The networks jeered Bush as a suitor but cheered him as a groom. During the general election, over two out of three sources (72%) on the evening news turned thumbs down on Bush. During the transition, this trend was reversed, as nearly two out of three sources (65%) approved of the President-elect.

This turnabout continues the history of volatility in Bush's TV news coverage. Throughout the primary campaign, source judgments split about evenly on candidate Bush (51% positive to 49% negative). During summer 1988, prior to the Republican convention, his bad press outweighed the good by 56% to 44%. Then the traditional convention boost was heightened by journalists' discovery of the "new" non-wimpy George Bush. For two weeks during and after the convention Bush enjoyed the longest sustained burst of positive coverage we have recorded for him - nearly 4 to 1 good over bad press (79% to 21%). As quickly as this wave built, however, it crested and broke. During the general election Bush's coverage was consistently negative reaching a margin of 72% negative to 28% positive from Labor Day to election day.





Mr. Reagan got off to a bad start and ended badly.

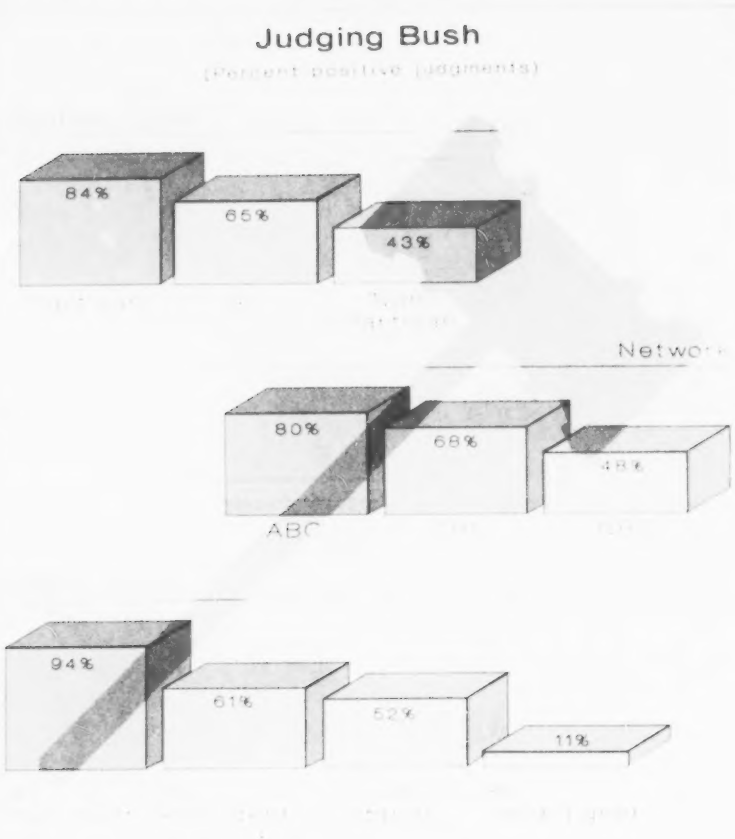
-Vernon Jordan
Urban League
ABC, 1/14

All in all, not bad at all.

-Ronald Reagan
ABC, 1/12

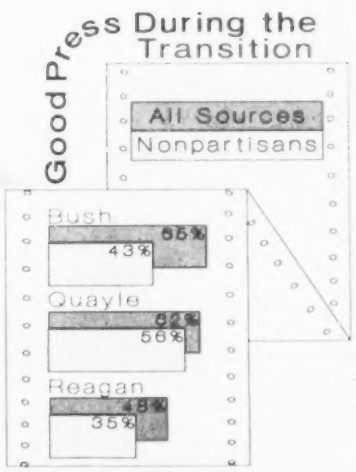
So the President-elect's "honeymoon" was just the latest surge in the ebb and flow of his media image. During the transition, there were wide variations in his coverage across networks, aspects of his performance, and the type of source being cited. During the campaign, the three networks each gave Bush roughly the same proportion of good and bad press. During the transition, NBC was significantly more critical than the other two. ABC and CBS did give Bush a real honeymoon, with 80% and 68% positive coverage, respectively. On NBC, by contrast, bad press slightly outweighed good press, by 52% to 48%.

Bush was praised for his performance since the election, even as criticism lingered over his campaign tactics. Comments on his actions as President-elect were 94% positive, while evaluations of his campaign were 89% negative (all calculations exclude neutral or mixed judgments, so positive and negative judgments add to 100%). Predictions of his likely performance as President were mainly positive, by 61% to 39%. But evaluations of his stands on policy issues were about evenly divided (52% positive vs. 48% negative).



Finally, Bush fared better among partisan sources (those identified as Democrats or Republicans) than among non-partisans (all others). His ratings by partisans were 84% positive; among non-partisans, only 43%. This gives an important clue to the nature and limitations of his "honeymoon." The preponderance of good press resulted from the new administration's domination of the public stage and the muting of criticism by the opposition party. For example, on November 18, NBC aired House Speaker Jim Wright's positive assessment: "He (Bush) chose to come see me, that was wonderful. I thought it was a good sign. He showed by doing that, that he is willing to come half-way." Meanwhile, non-partisan sources (including reporters) were hardly more positive during the transition than they were during the general election (43% vs. 35%).

Thus, Bush's media honeymoon seemed an effect of his political honeymoon, rather than a cause of it. This follows the pattern scholars have observed in the past. Ronald Reagan received harsh TV news coverage during the 1980 campaign, very positive coverage immediately after his election, and sharply critical coverage after he took office. Though he left office with the highest approval rating (64%) of any President in the age of scientific polling, Reagan still received more bad press than good, by 52% to 48%, during his final days in the White House. Among nonpartisan sources, his negative evaluations outweighed positive ones by nearly 2 to 1 (65% to 35%).



In fact, several of Bush's positive evaluations were also backhanded swipes at Reagan. Sample: NBC's Andrea Mitchell (11/30) reported Jesse Jackson's statement that "the President-elect showed an openness and willingness to listen; something he did not find in Ronald Reagan."

The greatest beneficiary of the transition honeymoon may have been Dan Quayle, who leaped from only 34% good press during the campaign (worse that any other candidate except for Gary Hart) to 62% since November, including 56% among nonpartisan sources.

Media Monitor

The New George Bush

Often defensive and testy during the election campaign, the new Bush is confident, spontaneous, good natured and very much in charge.

-Andrea Mitchell
NBC, 11/27

If President-elect George Bush gets any better at this healing process, they may have to add the title "doctor" to his name.

-Tom Brokaw
NBC, 11/30

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Volume III, Number 3 March 1989

The Visible Poor

Media Coverage of the Homeless 1986-1989

How have the media covered the debate over homelessness in America? We analyzed national print and broadcast coverage of the homeless over 28 months, from November 1986 through February 1989. We monitored the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, along with the major news magazines - *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. The coverage totalled 103 television stories lasting 3 hours and 31 minutes and 26 magazine stories with a cumulative 641 column inches.

Major Findings

■ **'Tis the Season** - TV news ran twice as many stories on the homeless from November through February as it did during the other eight months of the year. *Page 2*

■ **The Source's Mouth** - Homeless people themselves were the largest source of information. They were cited more often than local, state, and federal officials combined. *Page 3*

■ **Washington Washout** - One out of four sources blamed government inaction for the problem. Almost two-thirds of the criticism of government policies and programs appeared on ABC. *Page 4*

■ **New York, New York** - TV profiled homeless people in New York City five times as often as anywhere else. *Page 6*

■ **People Like Us** - One in four homeless people featured were children, only one in four was identified as unemployed, and only one in twelve was identified as a drug or alcohol user.

Media Monitor (Copyright 1989) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

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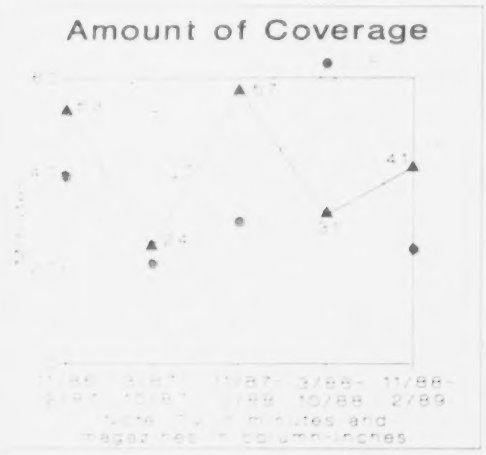
Season's Greetings

We examined all stories on homelessness on the major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts), and news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*) from November 1986 through February 1989 -- a period of two years and four months. During that time the networks devoted 103 stories lasting a total of 3 hours 31 minutes to the topic, and the newsweeklies featured 26 stories covering 641 column inches (the equivalent of about 22 full pages of text with no pictures or headings).



These outlets provide a truly national news agenda on homelessness, as opposed to nationally influential newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which give heavy coverage to local conditions. The lengthy time period was chosen to show the seasonal ebb and flow of coverage, especially on television.

Network coverage of the homeless rose during cold weather periods and fell during warm weather months. Ironically, NBC's Tom Brokaw noted (12/5/86) that homelessness "is not a seasonal phenomenon. It won't go away in the spring or summer." Only the cameras went away.

Magazine coverage was affected less by nature than by politics. Their news of the homeless skyrocketed during 1988 as candidates injected homelessness into the Presidential election. But the saturation coverage during the campaign apparently exhausted the editors' interest. Magazine coverage of homelessness from November 1988 through February 1989 plummeted to just over one-third the total of the preceding warm-weather months (77 vs. 208 column inches), even as the networks were increasing their coverage.

We are watching a Darwinian struggle for survival and the weak are losing.

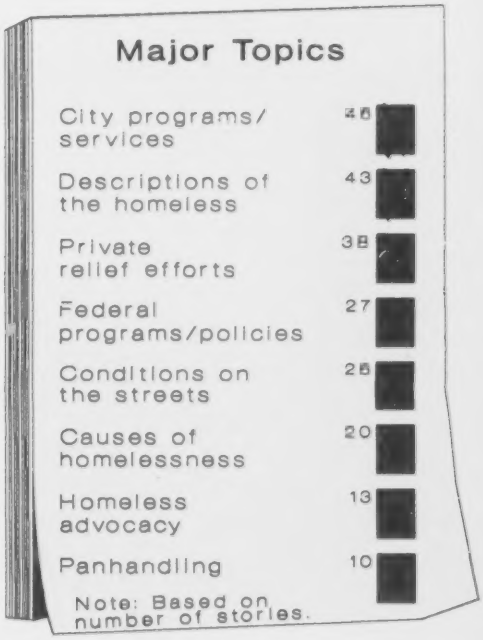
-Bob Hayes
Coalition for Homelessness
Newsweek
3/21/88

It's hard to remember that this is America, not Calcutta.

-Sociologist
U.S. News
8/3/87

Local News

News of the homeless revolved around two questions: Who are they, and what is being done to help them? As a national story, homelessness was really a collection of local stories from around the country, with primary focus on city programs and services (or their absence) and locally based private efforts, rather than federal programs and policies.



A second major topic concerned the characteristics of homeless individuals - their personal backgrounds and social demography. The focus here was descriptive rather than analytical. Discussions of who the homeless are more than

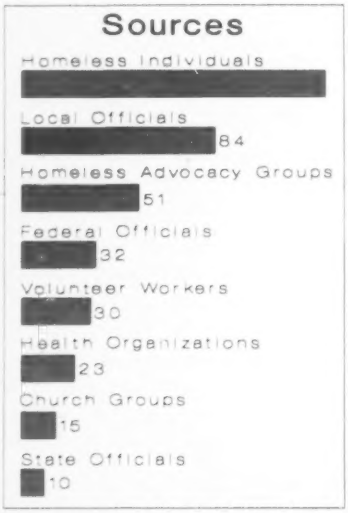
doubled the number of stories on the causes of homelessness. In addition, the coverage was mainly a sympathetic portrayal of people in trouble rather than an arena of policy debate. For example, stories on homeless advocacy groups outnumbered those on such problematic topics as panhandling and the institutionalization of mentally ill "street people".

Government as usual has meant virtual paralysis, no one eager to accept responsibility.

-Susan Spencer
CBS, 1/24/88

Speaking Out

The news on social problems and issues typically relies heavily on official Washington for information and quotations. Homelessness proved an exception to this rule. Local officials outnumbered federal officials as sources, and the homeless themselves outnumbered local, state, and federal officials combined (132 vs. 126 citations).



The story was carried forward by the affected individuals and their advocates rather than the professionals and policy-makers whom reporters often seek out to provide expert testimony on social problems. For example, the organization quoted most often was the National Coalition for Homelessness, an advocacy group whose citations doubled those of the federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Health and Human Services (HHS) combined. Similarly, the flamboyant homeless advocate Mitch Snyder was quoted more often on this topic than either Ronald Reagan or George Bush.

Typical quotations involved homeless people telling their own stories or advocacy groups, volunteer workers describing the difficulties of meeting their needs, and advocates calling for social action. For example: a spokesman from the National Union for the Homeless charged on CBS (1/24/88), "Our history tells us that poverty and homelessness is not going to end until we start to come together and begin to march, begin to go to jail and begin to say to government, 'you cannot function business as usual no more'."

Thus, the homeless story represents a particular genre of reportage -- news from the bottom up, rather than the more typical top-down approach that relies on quotes from recognizable names and officially sanctioned positions of authority.

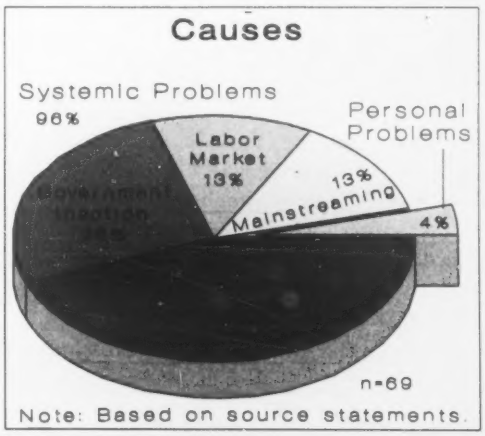
With cutbacks in federal low-income housing, mental health, drug and alcohol programs, the homeless population has exploded.

-Tom Brokaw
ABC, 2/9/89

The System Failed

Although few stories explored the causes of homelessness in depth, many sources (69 in all) offered their opinions. The reasons they cited leaned heavily on structural rather than personal explanations. Only 4% attributed the plight of the homeless to their own personal problems, such as mental illness, lack of motivation, or drug and alcohol abuse.

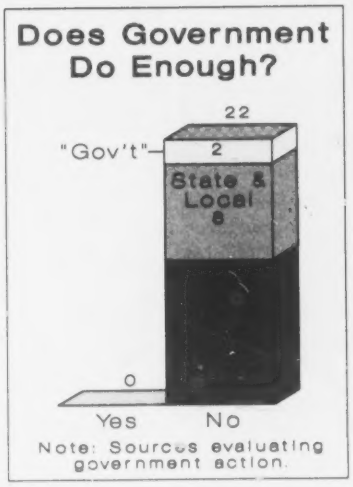
By far the largest number (44%) cited housing market forces, such as high mortgage interest rates, high rents, or disappearing single room occupancy hotels (SRO's), that diminish the supply of affordable housing. For example, CBS's David Dow began one vignette, "The picture in San Diego was sadly familiar -- homeless crowds swollen by downtown redevel-



opment." Next in line for blame (26%) was government inaction, particularly the lack of necessary public services or assistance, along with indictments of bureaucratic callousness or inefficiency in dealing with those unable to shelter themselves, e.g. diminishing or poorly run public housing programs.

The remaining 26% of source comments were evenly divided between labor market forces and mainstreaming of the mentally ill. Labor market forces blamed for homelessness included not only unemployment but low wage scales that made it impossible for some employed people to find or keep affordable housing. Discussions of mainstreaming focused on the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1970's, which released many mentally ill people into the community, and also on the subsequent lack of services that prevented them from fending for themselves.

A notable feature of this discussion was the willingness of reporters themselves to comment on the causes of homelessness. They accounted for 71% of all the reasons presented to explain this phenomenon. As *Time's* Nancy Gibbs wrote, "They are victims of broken and abusive homes, or were squeezed between rising prices and stagnant wages, or were forgotten by an impenetrable bureaucracy." (9/5/88). Normally assertions about the causes of social problems are attributed to experts or advocates. On this topic, journalists proved unusually willing to speak for themselves.

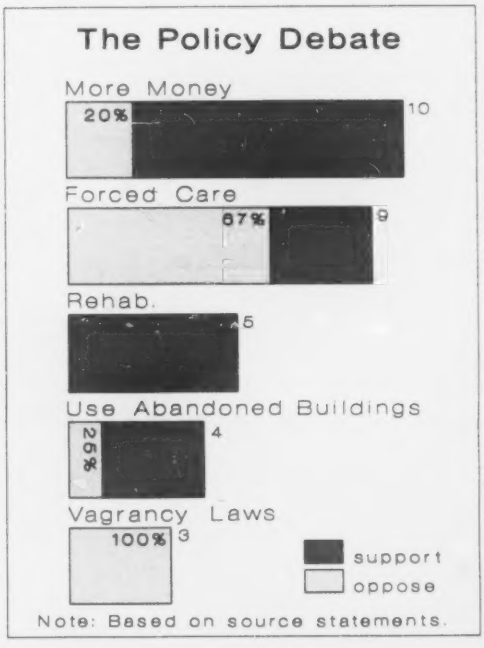


less advocate, "We're kidding ourselves if we think the private sector and the religious community can take care of the problem." NBC's Robert Hager (12/19/88) charged that "the Reagan administration has virtually ignored the law "(requiring the) government to make any temporarily vacant federal building available for shelter space." And *Newsweek's* Tom Mathews asked sarcastically, "How well has the (Reagan) experiment worked? Check the streets or go down to the bus depot some night in winter. You will see for yourself." (3/21/88).

This emphasis on the political system's inadequacy is a natural counterpart to the stress on systemic causes of homelessness. It was presented as a problem to which the system has failed to respond adequately. Specific solutions, however, were rarely debated. The most frequent option raised was the need for more funding, which was endorsed by 8 out of 10 sources. For example, ABC's Peter Jennings reported (2/4/87), "On Capital Hill today, the

The homeless won't get very far unless they can persuade a Republican to break with Ronald Reagan's policies -- or elect a Democrat.

-Tom Mathews
Newsweek
3/21/88



Policy Debate

There was surprisingly little debate over what to do about homelessness, aside from general assertions that government was not doing enough to help. Twenty-two sources addressed the government's role, and all 22 found it wanting. Almost two-thirds of these criticisms appeared on a single outlet, ABC news, with the remainder spread across the other networks and the magazines. For example, one ABC story (2/5/87) quoted a home-

House of Representatives passed a bill with great ease. The bill will provide $50 million in emergency funding for the homeless. That is a pittance compared to what is needed, and Congress knows it." By contrast, the institutionalization of mentally ill homeless people was raised nearly as frequently but was usually rejected. The only other policies to receive even a limited hearing were the need for rehabilitation programs, the use of vagrancy laws to forcibly provide shelter, and the use of abandoned buildings to house the homeless.

America is increasingly becoming a nation of housing haves and housing have-nots.

-MIT expert
U.S. News
8/3/87

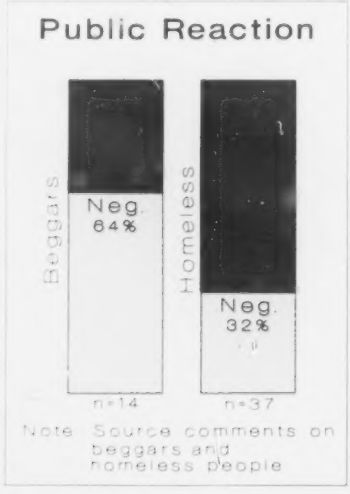
Public Relations

In addition to portraying the homeless themselves, the media provided numerous images of the public's reaction to them. The coverage distinguished between the homeless per se and the beggars or panhandlers whose growing presence in urban areas has sparked debate and municipal legislation. In general, attention turned to the problem of panhandling during the warm weather months and returned to the plight of shivering street people during periods of cold weather.

We need a martial plan, a Berlin airlift for the cities.

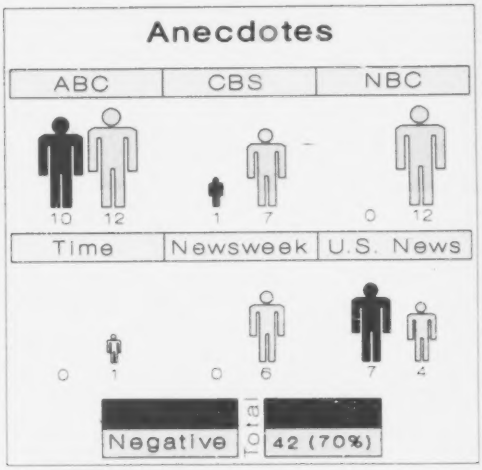
-New York City official
Newsweek
3/21/88

Over two out of three people who were asked their reactions to the homeless (68%) expressed either compassion for their plight or an active defense of their need for support. The remainder expressed irritation or anger at the inconvenience or unpleasantness caused by their presence. Reactions to panhandlers (as a subgroup of the homeless) were reversed, with nearly two-thirds (64%) criticizing them or giving some version of a NIMBY response -- "not in my backyard." Sample: "I want them off my sidewalk. If you think I'm heartless for saying that, can I send then to live on your sidewalk?" - *Newsweek* (12/1/86).



Real People

A major aspect of this story was the heavy use of anecdotes -- personalized accounts or illustrations that stressed the human face of homelessness and efforts to deal with it. Because of their concreteness, visual impact, and emotional appeal, anecdotes occupy a central role in the media's portrayal of the homeless.



Anecdotes could be negative (e.g. illustrations of hopelessness and despair), positive (e.g. innovative local programs), or neutral.

Sample positive anecdote: A *U.S. News* story (2/29/88) dealing with the mentally ill homeless described a woman who lived on the streets despite being raped and beaten "because she believed anyone who gave her food was trying to poison her." After psychiatric intervention and medication, however, "her delusions faded" and she was able to move into a low-rent apartment. Sample negative anecdote: During an ABC (2/4/88) story on a homeless family's travails, the mother talked about her children: "He's five years old and she's seven, and they already know what's crack and what's cocaine. That is terrible, terrible."

We coded 174 personal anecdotes, of which 60 were clearly positive or negative in tone. Among the latter, most (70%) were downbeat, stressing problems and failures. But the overall mix varied sharply among media outlets. On television, ABC featured by far the most (22), with a fairly even division between positive

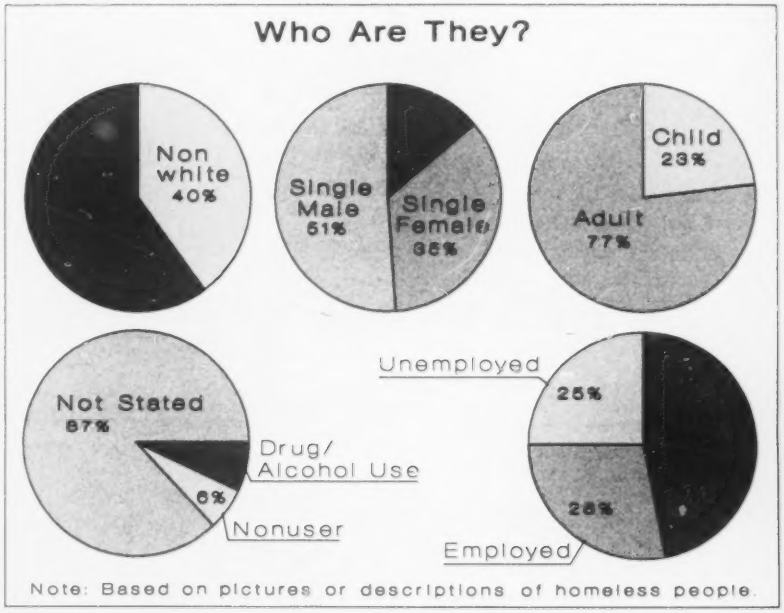
(45%) and negative (55%) anecdotes. The other networks were far more downbeat. NBC offered 12 negative and no positive personal illustrations. Only one out of seven features on CBS was upbeat.

The spread was even greater at the news magazines, where verbal anecdotes were often illustrated or supplemented with pictures (and, in one case, a "photo essay"). *Newsweek* printed six negative and no positive anecdotes, while *U.S. News* emerged as the only outlet to accentuate the positive, with 64% upbeat anecdotes (7 of 11). How much did the tone vary? ABC and *U.S. News* together ran 17 positive anecdotes; the other four outlets combined for only one.

In addition to conveying the tone of coverage, anecdotes provided a concrete image of who and where the homeless are. The location of most vignettes illustrates the geographic bias of national media. New York City accounted for over three times as many anecdotes (52) as any other city, and as many as the next six most heavily covered cities combined. The coastal focus of coverage was also evident in the cities that followed New York in this amount of coverage -- Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Boston. The lure of Manhattan was strongest on television, where New York rated 30 anecdotes. Boston ranked second with only five.

The human face of homelessness presented in personal anecdotes belied the skid row image of down and out unemployed males with alcohol or drug dependence. Just over half the homeless profiled (51%) were single males. One in every seven (14%) were families who lacked shelter, and nearly one in four (23%) were children. Only 7% were identified as drug or alcohol users, and nearly as many were explicitly identified as nonusers. (No mention was made of substance abuse in the vast majority of cases.)

Similarly, the working homeless attracted a great deal of attention. The employment status of homeless individuals was identified about half the time. Among this subgroup, a slight majority (51%) were currently employed. Only one homeless individual was identified as a criminal. Overall, this portrait conveyed an image of the deserving poor who differ from other Americans mainly in their lack of housing, not in any social, psychological, or behavioral deficiency. As CBS's Martha Tischener put it(11/11/86), "People who once gave to the needy now are the needy."



You can't know what it's like until you've experienced it really.

-Homeless mother
NBC, 12/5/86

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The Big Spill

Covering the Exxon Valdez Alaskan Oil Spill

How have the media covered the Alaskan oil spill from the Exxon Valdez tanker? We monitored print and broadcast coverage of the accident and the first two weeks of cleanup efforts, from March 24 through April 7. We analyzed the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, along with four major newspapers -- the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*. The coverage totalled 88 television stories lasting 2 hours 39 minutes, and 121 newspaper articles totalling 2,620 column inches. In addition, we monitored all jokes about the oil spill appearing on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night."

Major Findings

- **Disaster Watch** - Hiroshima and Three Mile Island were among the top five comparisons to past disasters. *Page 2*

- **Blaming Exxon** - Fewer than one source in five blamed Exxon for the accident. But 71% of sources criticized the company's clean-up efforts, and only 19% praised them. *Page 2*

- **From Bad to Worse** - Opinion on Exxon ran over 2 to 1 negative on TV. But it reached 6 to 1 negative in the newspapers. *Page 3*

- **Pictures of Despair** - TV broadcast nearly 100 different pictures of oil-coated animals, over six per night. *Page 4*

- **The Joke's on Exxon** - The oil spill was the leading source of topical humor on the "Tonight Show" and "Late Night with David Letterman." It inspired over 5 jokes per night, most aimed at Exxon.

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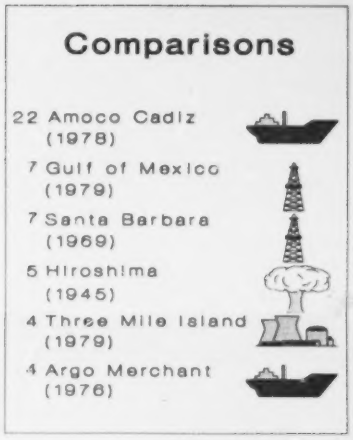
Media Spillover

We monitored major newspaper and television network coverage of the Valdez, Alaska oil spill from March 24 through April 7. During those first two weeks after the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground, ABC, CBS, and NBC aired 88 stories on their evening news shows, for a collective 2 hours, 39 minutes of coverage. Meanwhile, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* each ran between 700 and 800 column inches on the story and the *Wall Street Journal* added nearly 350 inches. These four influential newspapers together printed 121 stories on the spill and its aftermath, totalling 2,620 column inches. On average, that amount of coverage would fill over 37 pages of newspaper text.

Compared to What?

One way the media conveyed the circumstances, magnitude, and impact of the accident was through comparison to past oil spills and other man-made disasters. By far the most frequent comparison raised was the 1978 Amoco Cadiz tanker spill, with over three times as many mentions as any other (22). Next in line were two accidents that took place on off-shore oil rigs (7 mentions apiece).



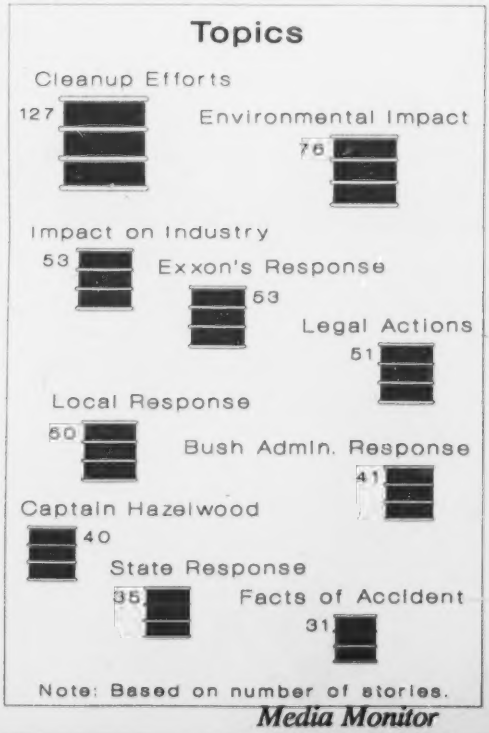
But rounding out the top five were two events with no immediate connection to oil spills -- the bombing of Hiroshima (5 mentions) and the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (4 comments). The Hiroshima comparison reflected widespread press attention to Judge Kenneth Rohl's charge, upon setting bail for tanker captain Joseph Hazelwood, that the destruction equaled that of the 1945 nuclear blast. Among the Three Mile Island comparisons was oil industry critic Ed Rothschild's statement in the *Washington Post* that, "In the same way that Three Mile Island dealt a blow to the nuclear industry in its efforts to expand nuclear power in the United States, I think it's the same way here."

Overall there were relatively few comparisons to industrial accidents or man-made disasters with no connections to the oil industry. For example, the 1984 Union Carbide plant explosion in Bhopal, India was used as a point of comparison only twice.

Oil and Water

The drama in this disaster story came not from the accident but its aftermath. The cleanup attracted nearly ten times as many stories as the circumstances of the spill (127 vs. 31). The major interpretative focus was the threat posed to the environment (76 stories), followed by the likely impact on the oil industry (53 stories). The Bush administration kept a low profile, generating only 41 stories concerning its response to the oil spill, fewer than the 50 stories devoted to the local community's response.

In terms of the spill's environmental impact, the plight of sea otters elicited by far the most attention of any single creature (43 stories). Media attention was about evenly divided among the dangers to mammals (65 stories) and birds (58 stories), followed by threats to fish (37), and the ocean or bay in general (21).

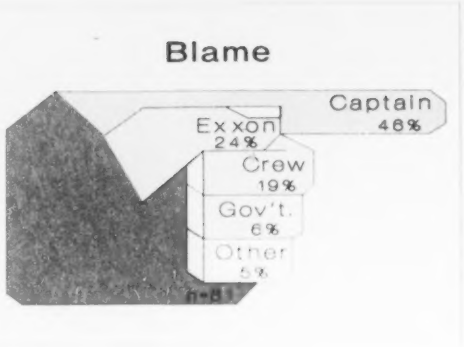


Casting Stones

Who was to blame for the accident? The finger was pointed nearly half the time (45%) at the ship's captain, Joseph Hazelwood. Corporate guilt finished a distant second, as 24% of sources argued that the fault lay with Exxon's policies or

corporate behavior. An additional 18% faulted the tanker's crew, and 6% took issue with government's role in failing to prevent the accident.

The various outlets differed widely in their willingness to cast stones. The most frequent source of criticism was the *Washington Post*. The *Post* published 26 accusations of fault or negligence, more than the three television networks combined (19), or both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* (11 apiece). The *Wall Street Journal* was the second most judgmental outlet, with 16 accusations. At the networks, ABC took the lead in finding fault, with 12 accusations, compared to only 4 on CBS and 3 on NBC.

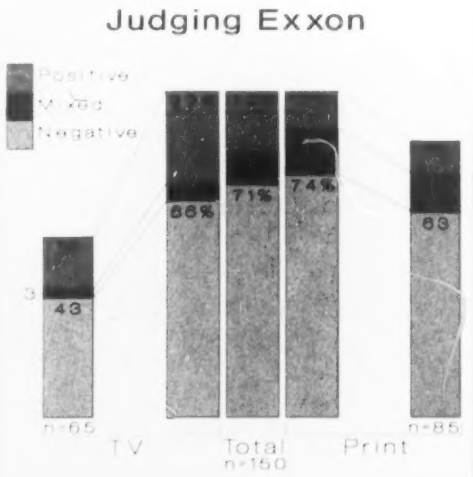


A man-made destruction . . . that probably has not been equaled since Hiroshima.

-Judge Kenneth Rohl
NBC, 4/5

Exxon's Black Eye

We coded 150 statements about how well Exxon reacted (including judgments of Alyeska Pipeline). Assessments of the company's role were usually critical, by 71% negative to 19% positive, with the remaining 10% mixed. Sample positive: "(The cleanup) is going at full speed. It is very effective so far as the number of people and resources involved." -- Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner, NBC, 3/30. Sample negative: "Exxon seemed to respond to the oil spill . . . in slow motion, raising questions about whether all the (corporate) downsizing had weakened the company -- not only in terms of a decimated oil spill control team, but of overall management control." -- Claudia Deutsch, *New York Times* reporter, 4/2.



Exxon fared significantly better on television than in print. Judgments of the oil company were just over 2 to 1 negative (66% to 29%) on the network news, compared to an overwhelming 6 to 1 margin (74% to 12%) in newspaper articles. The difference reflected Exxon's relative success in getting its spokesmen on the airwaves. Over two thirds of the company's positive assessments on television (13 of 19) came from its own officials. The four newspapers together printed only three defenses of the company's conduct from Exxon spokesmen. Exxon fared best on NBC, with 40% positive assessments. It fared worst in the pages of the *New York Times*, which printed 6% positive, 82% negative, and 12% mixed judgments. But the *Wall Street Journal*, the nation's premier business newspaper, was not much kinder. There Exxon received only 13% positive judgments, compared to 78% negative and 9% mixed.

Much of the criticism came from Alaska's Governor Cowper (10 negative judgments) and Department of Environmental Conservation Chief Dennis Kelso (9). Aside from state officials, angry local fishermen were the company's most frequently quoted detractors. Reporters themselves accounted for 7 unattributed criticisms and no positive assessments.

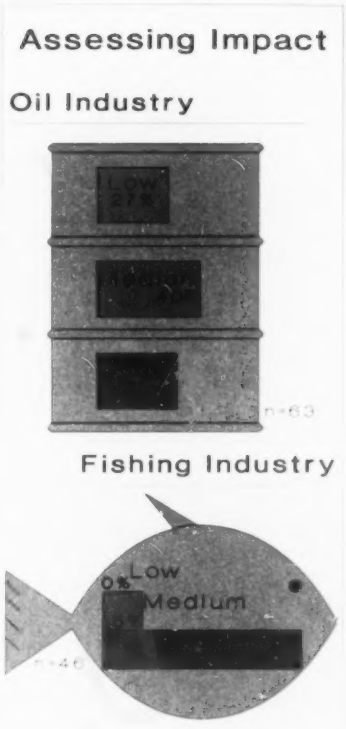
While Exxon was taking a beating in the media, the Bush administration's handling of the accident received relatively little attention. Press notices were mainly negative, by a 3 to 2 margin, but that figure is based on only 15 assessments. So polls showing public dissatisfaction of Bush's handling of the environment probably reflected the public's tendency to blame those in charge when things go wrong, rather than criticism in the media.

Damage Patrol

Although most media accounts were critical of Exxon's response, there was much less agreement about the long-term financial impact of the oil spill on Exxon and the rest of the oil

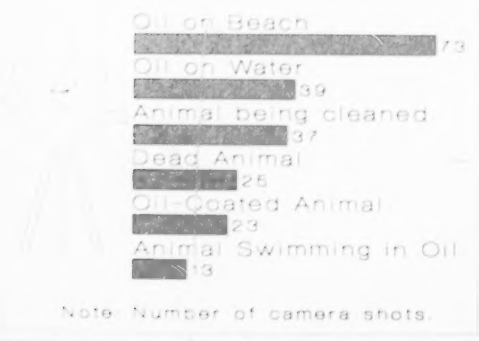
industry. The 63 sources were sharply divided: 33% argued that the accident will produce major new constraints on future exploration, will cause extensive damage to Exxon's financial situation, etc; 40% foresaw moderate but not seriously adverse effects; and 27% forecast negligible damage at most. There was no disagreement about the impact on Exxon's public image, though; all seven sources who addressed this question saw future image problems for the company.

There was also widespread agreement that the impact on the area's fishing industry would be devastating. Not a single source (among 46) downplayed the impact as negligible, and only 15% saw the damage as moderate. The remaining 85% portrayed the cost to the fishing industry as severe or extensive, despite any aid or compensation that might be forthcoming.



Images of Disaster

The spill's environmental impact was portrayed most clearly by television's pictures. In the first 15 days of coverage, viewers of the network evening newscasts were shown 98 pictures of oil-covered animals, including 25 shots of dead animals, 13 of live animals swimming in oil, 37 of oil-covered animals being cleaned, and another 23 of oil-coated animals in various conditions. An additional 39 shots showed oil washing up on beaches and 73 focused on oil slicks on the open water.



Now you can get fish sticks in leaded and unleaded.

- Jay Leno
3/29

(The news) tonight showed baby seals clubbing Exxon officials.

-Jay Leno
4/10

Black Humor

Late-night television provided a darkly humorous counterpoint to the gloomy picture portrayed on the newscasts. We monitored opening monologues on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night" by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman, respectively. The oil spill (and especially Exxon's failings) provided by far the most jokes (53) of any public issue during this period (3/24 - 4/7), easily outstripping the numbers devoted to the next most frequently joked-about topics -- crime and drugs (19), religious fundamentalists (10), and the USSR (8, including Gorbachev's trip to Cuba).

According to Carson (4/5), Exxon was "pretty cavalier about the whole thing. Their idea of a clean-up crew was to send Nancy Walker up there with a roll of *Bounty* towels." Carson also suggested (4/6) a new slogan for Exxon: "We're not as bad as Union Carbide." Leno unleashed a string of Exxon jokes on 4/3: "Put a tiger in your tank? Why don't they try putting a skipper in the tanker? . . . They're thinking of changing their name to Accidental Petroleum. . . . They can't even keep their restrooms clean. How are they going to clean up an entire coast?" Leno also claimed a TV show is coming out "about a group of Alaskan yuppies. It's called 10w thirtysomething." And David Letterman (3/29) contributed his own list of the "top ten new Exxon slogans." Among them: "Ecosystem, schmecosystem!"; "Exxon transport: the Eastern airlines of the sea"; "If it weren't for us, American seagulls would be covered with foreign oil!"; and "Anybody got a tissue?"

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Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037 202-223-2942

Volume III, Number 5 June 1989

The Low Profile President

First Reports on the Bush Administration

How have the networks covered George Bush and his administration since Inauguration Day? We monitored 631 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news during the first 100 days of the Bush administration (January 20 through April 29), along with political humor on NBC "Tonight Show" monologues. This month's *Media Monitor* also examines all evaluations of policies and personnel during the administration's first 50 days (through March 11).

Major Findings

■ **Peerless Leader** - During his first 100 days in office, Bush attracted only 37% as many stories as Ronald Reagan in 1981, and 45% as many as Jimmy Carter in 1977. *Page 2*

■ **Goodbye Tower** - Opinion on Senator Tower ran 8 to 1 negative among non-partisan sources. 40% of stories airing charges provided no rebuttal time. *Page 2*

■ **Mixed Reviews** - Bush got good marks from three out of five sources. But his policies were criticized by seven out of ten. *Page 3*

■ **CBS Votes No** - Evaluations of Bush were only 39% positive on CBS, compared to 63% positive on NBC and 85% on ABC. Ratings of Bush's policies ran 4 to 1 negative on CBS. *Page 3*

CHINA UPDATE - The networks ran 176 stories on China in 12 days during and after Gorbachev's visit. CBS led with 75 stories. The coverage increased after the government halted network transmissions.

Media Monitor (copyright 1989) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

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The Vanishing President

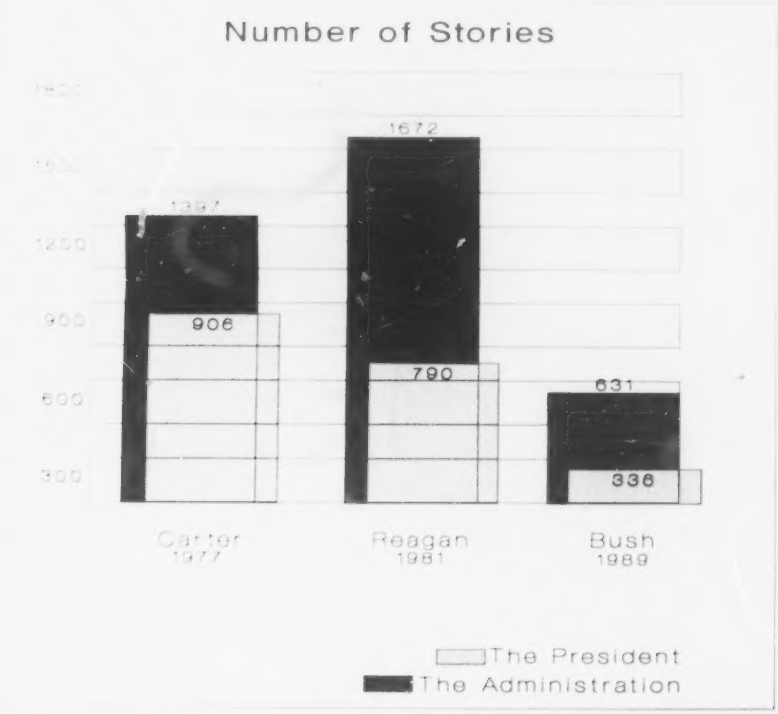
This is the first report from the Center's ongoing tracking of how TV news covers the presidency. We monitor all stories on the Bush administration from the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. The data on the amount of coverage run through the first 100 days of the new administration, from January 20 to April 29. The full analysis reflects the first 50 days, from January 20 to March 11.

During Bush's first 100 days in office, he was the focus of 336 TV news stories, an average of barely one per network per day. This is less than half the number devoted to his most recent predecessors at comparable points in their first terms. Bush was the focus of only 37% as many stories as Ronald Reagan in 1981 and 43% as many as Jimmy Carter in 1977. (The earlier figures are derived from the Vanderbilt University TV News Abstracts.)

Overall figures for the entire administration are similar. This administration's 631 stories were 45% of the total devoted to Reagan's administration and 38% of Carter's.

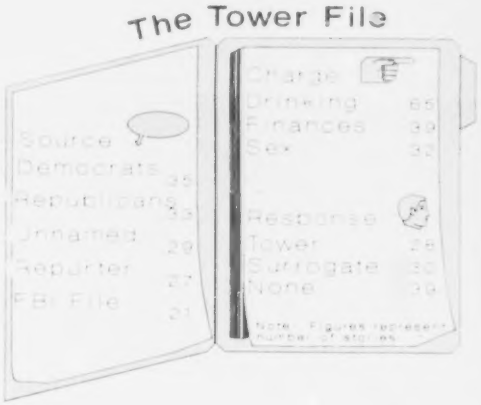
More and more observers are giving (Bush) failing grades ... for policy drift and slowness ... too much emphasis on style, not enough on developing a coherent policy ... an administration floundering.

-Lesley Stahl
CBS, 1/24

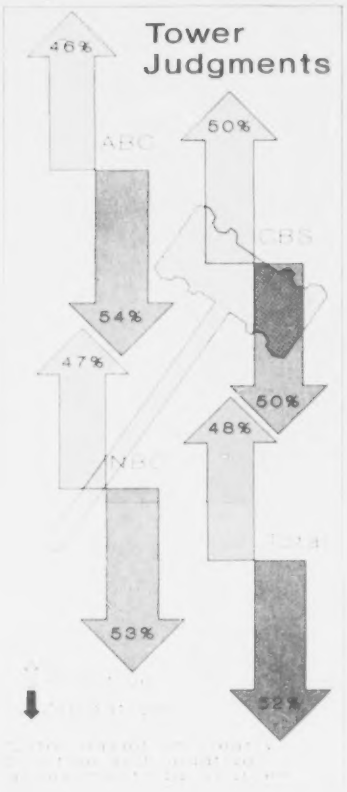


Tower's Troubles

The major story of the Bush administration's first two months was the Senate's rejection of Defense Secretary-designate John Tower. The ethics or morality of Tower's private life was discussed in 98 stories. The most widely discussed charge was alcohol abuse, which was raised in 65 stories, followed by financial conflicts of interest (39 stories), and sexual impropriety (32 stories). Discussions of these issues were raised by Democrats and Republicans in about equal numbers (35 vs. 33 stories). The media's role in the proceedings became an issue after widespread reporting of allegations from unnamed sources and confidential FBI files. We found that 35% of all stories questioning Tower's personal behavior or ethics contained allegations from unnamed sources, 25% referenced FBI reports, and 32% relied on unattributed statements by reporters themselves. When such charges were raised, they often contained no response from the nominee. Tower himself replied to criticisms in 29% of all stories, and his supporters provided on-air responses in 31% more, leaving 40% that challenged his behavior without providing a rebuttal.



Tower's behavior was judged by 162 clearly positive or negative source ratings. Evaluations of Tower's behavior were about evenly balanced - 52% to 48% positive. Criticism was strongest among non-partisan sources, whose negative comments outweighed positive ones by an 8 to 1 margin (89% to 11%). Among partisans, 77% of Republican sources defended Tower, compared to only 23% of Democratic sources.

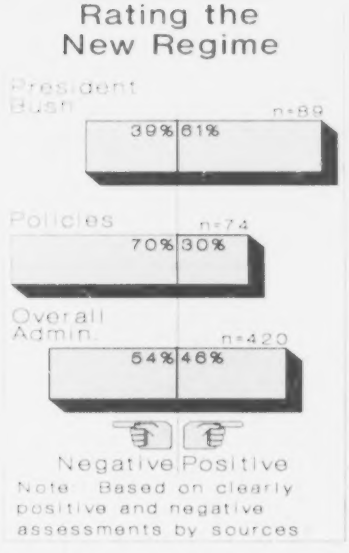


Honeymoon Watch

Overall George Bush got good marks from the media. But his personal reviews were not matched by those of his policy proposals or his administration as a whole. Bush was often praised for his civility and his efforts to reach out to opponents and consider new ideas. But his administration was criticized for lack of vision and leadership, slowness and drift in start-up, and for specific policy choices such as the proposed savings and loan bailout.

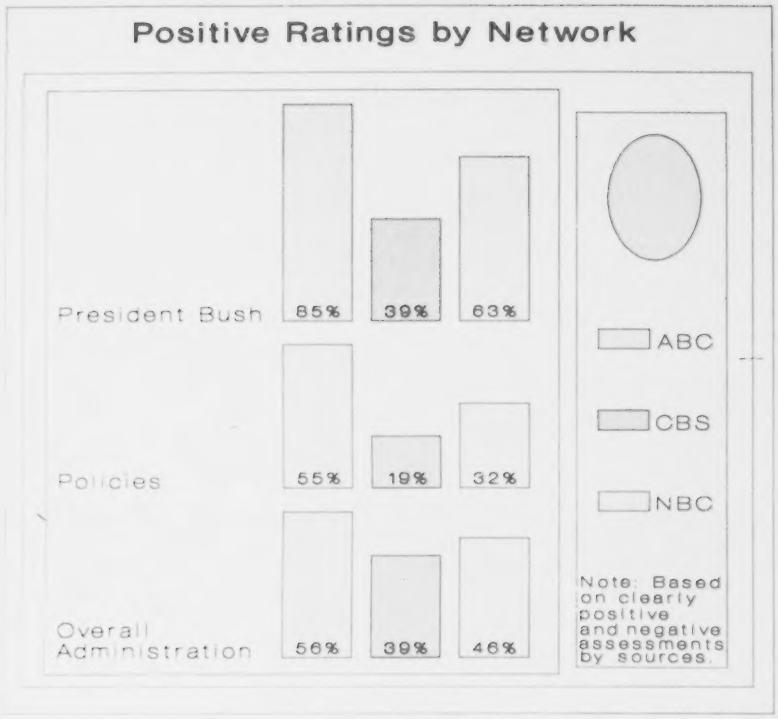
We coded all positive and negative assessments of Bush's personal style, ethics, job performance, and issue stances. Over three out of five judgments (61%) were positive, up sharply from the meager 34% positive rating he received during the general election. Moreover, his ratings were even better among non-partisan sources (63% positive) than among those identified as Republicans or Democrats (60% positive). For example, ABC's Brit Hume gave a glowing critique of a press conference (1/27) that, he said, showed "George Bush at his good-humored best." And on February 20 the same network ran a man-in-the-street interview that concluded, "I like what (Bush) seems to stand for, even though I'm a Democrat."

Yet this media honeymoon did not extend beyond the person of the President. Comments on Bush's policy proposals have run over two to one negative (70% to 30%). Thus, NBC broadcast a man-in-the-street interview (1/25) calling the administration's proposed S & L bailout "the nuttiest proposal I've ever heard." Dan Rather criticized Bush's foreign policy as "largely unfocused and on hold" (3/6). And his colleague Wyatt Andrews commented sarcastically (2/17) that the education budget "means cuts in old programs (inner city schools) counted on before while the 'education president' spends the money somewhere else." Overall, assessments of the administration were tilted slightly toward the negative column, by 54% to 46%. But the majority of plaudits came from Republican partisans. Non-partisan sources turned thumbs down on the administration, by nearly a 2 to 1 margin (63% to 37%).



CBS vs. Bush

Our most striking finding is an unusual difference of opinion among the networks. Bush was praised regularly on ABC (85% positive) and NBC (63% positive) but only rarely on CBS (39% positive). For example, on January 24 Lesley Stahl declared, "(On) the budget deficit, (Bush) hit the ground walking. ... It's Day Two and there isn't even agreement on a format for budget talks." And Wyatt Andrews complained on February 11 that, "He's asked to rearrange national priorities but with a budget that doesn't rearrange them by much." CBS has consistently rated Bush more poorly than the other two networks (46% positive source judgments on CBS vs. 53% on ABC and NBC combined during the



primaries, and 30% vs. 36% positive during the general election). But a gap of this magnitude (39% vs. 73%) is very unusual. Moreover, CBS was also toughest on the administration's policies. CBS's policy evaluations ran over 4 to 1 negative (81% to 19%) compared to a 2 to 1 negative rating on NBC (68% to 32%) and a slight positive edge (by 55% to 45%) on ABC.

No Laughing Matter

In keeping with his low media profile, Bush continued to be outstripped by other members of his administration in "Tonight Show" monologues. (During the campaign he was outpaced by Dan Quayle.) The administration's first hundred days found John Tower as its leading joke-getter with 56, compared to 52 for Bush and 35 for Quayle. Tower proved an irresistible target for one-liners about drinking and wenching: "The FBI interviewed over 400 witnesses, and those were just the bartenders" (Leno, 2/28); "Tower thought he had over 90 votes in the Senate, but he was just seeing double" (Leno, 2/28); "He's going out to be debimboed at the Gary Hart clinic" (Carson, 3/9). But the Senators also took some flak for hypocrisy: "The Senate judging John Tower on his moral character, that's like Morton Downey lecturing Geraldo on good taste" (Leno, 3/6).

Meanwhile Quayle jokes continued at a brisk pace. Sample: "The Treasury Department is selling a Dan Quayle bond. The only problem is that it takes about 48 years to mature" (Carson, 3/27). But news reports of Bush's slow start found their way into numerous monologues: "George is really off to a flying stop" (Carson, 3/24); "Bush is off to a shaky start. His 1000 points of light are marked down to 500 this week at Sears" (Carson, 3/10); and "the environmental president ... the education president ... the new ethics president ... he better get cracking or he'll be the ex-president" (Carson 4/7). Johnny Carson even joked about Bush's lack of media coverage: "President Bush is not getting nearly the television time Reagan did ... I think he's getting desperate -- (on) 'Hollywood Squares' I heard someone say, 'the President of the United States to block, John'" (Carson, 3/17).

China Coverage

	Gorbachev Visit (5/14 - 5/18)	Post-Visit (5/19 - 5/25)	*Total*
ABC	17	35	*52*
CBS	34	41	*75*
NBC	19	30	*49*
Total	**70**	**106**	***176***

Note: Number of stories.

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Volume III, Number 6 July/August 1989

The Budget and the Deficit

Covering the Battle Over the Budget

How have the media covered the partisan struggle over the 1989 federal budget and the deficit problem? We analyzed 236 news stories in the *Washington Post* and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news (5 hours 38 minutes of airtime) from November 1, 1988 until the budget compromise agreement on May 18, 1989. This month's *Media Monitor* also examines political humor on late-night TV shows during the first six months of the Bush administration.

Major findings:

- **Deficit Watch** - The budget deficit got more coverage than spending for defense, health, education, social security, the homeless, and the environment combined. *Page 2*

- **Thumbs Down** - 97% of all sources rejected the administration's economic projections. *Page 3*

- **No to Taxes** - Sources rejected tax increases by 71% to 29%. *Page 3*

- **Yes to Spending** - But 63% of sources called for increased federal spending; only 22% called for budget cuts. *Page 3*

HUMOR UPDATE We catalogued 1228 political jokes on late-night TV since Inauguration Day. Bush led with 83 jokes, but Quayle was closing fast with 78. Oil spills were joked about nearly twice as often as any other topic. *Page 4*

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The Budget Story

We monitored the network evening news and *Washington Post* coverage of the federal budget and the deficit from November 1, 1988, as President Bush prepared to take office, until May 18, 1989, when the Bush administration and Congressional Democrats agreed to a budget compromise. During this period the networks aired 123 budget-related stories running a cumulative 5 hours 38 minutes, and the *Post* printed 113 stories totalling 2292 column inches. Among the networks ABC lagged behind with 34 stories (81 minutes), compared to CBS's 45 stories (131 minutes) and NBC's 44 stories (126 minutes).

"You can read George Bush's lips, but you can't read his mind."

- Rep. Jim Sasser (D-TN)
Washington Post, 12/12/88

Deficits and Taxes

Deficits and taxes are becoming the "death and taxes" of economic news - unpleasant but apparently unavoidable topics that dominate the agenda for debate. Looming constantly over the budget battle was the problem of the deficit. It was mentioned in more stories (139) than any other single topic, more than Republican and Democratic budgetary strategies combined.

Among issue areas addressed by the budget, by far the most attention went to tax policy (68 stories). Among program areas, defense spending led the list (45 stories), but most discussion concerned cuts rather than new or expanded programs. Health came next (28 stories), dominated by discussion of catastrophic health care. Among all other programs, only the savings and loan failures (19) and education initiatives (16) attracted more than ten stories. After homelessness (9) and social security (8), no other topic garnered over five stories.

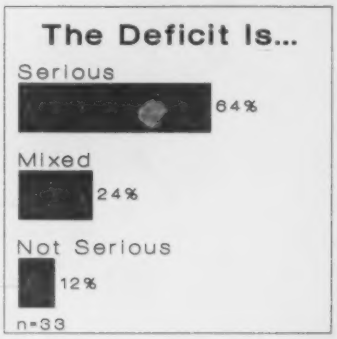
Issues Discussed

Taxes	**68**
Defense	**45**
Health	**28**
S&L's	**19**
Education	**16**
Homeless	**9**
Social Security	**8**
Environment	**5**

The networks differed little in terms of their program coverage, but the *Post's* coverage was more heavily focused on some topics than was television's. The *Post* ran twice as many stories as all three networks combined on military spending, the savings and loan bailout, and funding for the homeless. The *Post* also exceeded the combined network total of the stories on tax policy.

Spend Now Pay Later

Debate over budget issues was muted by President Bush's low-key bargaining with the Democratic controlled Congress and the resulting bipartisan agreement announced May 18. Thus, much of the news focused on the seriousness of the deficit problem and the unrealistic nature of the administration's economic projections, rather than the merits of particular programs or funding proposals.



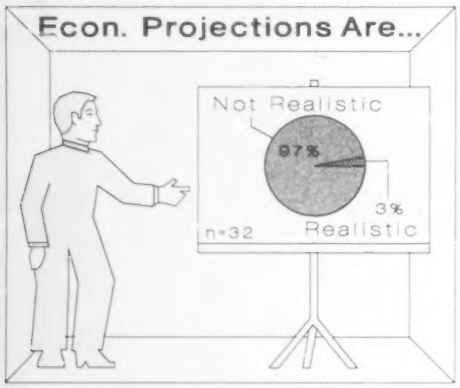
An often repeated theme concerned the gravity of the current deficit and its likely continuation. This subject was debated 33 times, and only 4 sources (12%) denied that it was a serious problem. Among the dissenters was economist John Makin, interviewed on NBC (2/5): "Those who are saying that the deficit is serious will always wind up saying we have to raise taxes. It is a serious political issue. It's not a serious economic issue."

For the most part, however, sources echoed the conclusion of former Presidents Ford and Carter that "the federal debt...is a symbol of our unwillingness to match our resources to our demands and our own ends, to try to make critical choices among competing priorities." (*Washington Post*, 1/23) Opinion was sufficiently consensual that reporters were unafraid to add their own voices to the chorus. Thus, the *Post's* Paul Blustein wrote on Jan 25 that the deficit "threatens to sap America's long-term

economic health...because it worsens the nation's principal economic problem: We consume too much and save too little."

Projections and Rejections

Almost as common as statements of the deficit's importance were rejections of the administration's economic predictions, which form the basis for the revenue side of the budget. Of 32 sources who evaluated these projections, all but one (97%) criticized or dismissed them. Thus, according to a January 5 report in the *Post*, "Many economists scoff at the administration's [deficit] forecast, especially



because it includes a prediction of rapid economic growth over the next six years," and NBC (4/14) quoted Sen. Lloyd Bentsen's (D-TX) reaction to the final compromise, "The agreement's economic assumptions are wildly optimistic."

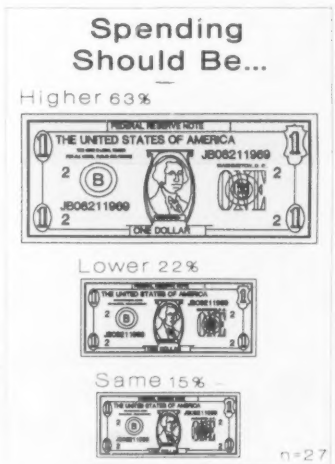
Taxing and Spending

Budget debates are traditionally about government's trade-offs between taxing and spending. Despite all the alarms about the deficit, however, spending was advocated far more often than taxing.

Among the 45 viewpoints aired or printed on changes in tax rates, those rejecting tax increases or calling for cuts outnumbered those favoring tax hikes by 71% to 29%. For example, the *Post* quoted Ronald Reagan (1/10), "Tax increases are not needed. History shows that they would simply be used by the Congress to increase spending."

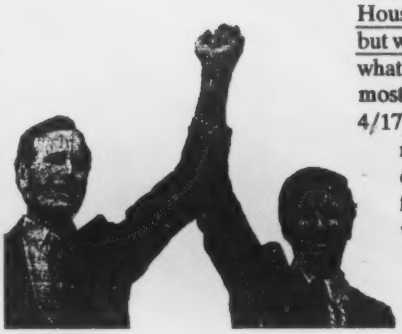
Opinion was much more closely divided on the value of a tax increase specifically to deal with the budget deficit. On this narrower issue, tax opponents outnumbered advocates by only 54% to 46%. For example, the *Post's* Blustein reported (11/30), "much of the nation's corporate and labor elite is united around the idea that shrinking the deficit is of paramount importance - and that the imposition of a tax increase is probably unavoidable."

At the same time, most sources who discussed government spending called for increased outlays. Among 27 sources quoted, 63% called for greater funding of programs, 15% argued that spending should be held constant, and only 22% called for budget cuts. Justifications of increased spending came from Republicans more often than Democrats. For example, the *Post* (2/18) quoted President Bush's cautious conclusion that, "Yes, we can afford to increase spending, modestly, selectively, and only after tough choices are made." On CBS (2/11), however, Wyatt Andrews criticized the Bush budget for not spending enough on social programs: "His kinder, gentler spending proposals are wide but not deep. He's asked to rearrange the national priorities, but with a budget that doesn't rearrange them by much."



The Joke's On ...

From January 20 through July 20, opening monologues on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night" included 1228 jokes on political topics and current affairs.



The leading individual target of TV comedians' sallies was George Bush with 83. Samples: "President Bush got very upset about the Court's recent decision on flag burning. I can understand his point of view. If you're going to wrap yourself in the flag you don't want somebody setting fire to it." (Leno, 6/28); "(He's) off to a shaky start. (His) 1000 points of light are marked down to 500 this week at Sears." (Carson, 3/10) But many of the Bush jokes came during his first weeks in office. Dan Quayle has been coming on strong, with 42 jokes to 31 for Bush since May 1, to vie for the overall lead with 78 jokes.

"Quayle jokes" are becoming a distinctive genre, focusing on the Vice-President's alleged lack of intelligence or other qualifications for office: "If Dan Quayle were a woman he'd be pointing at dinette sets on a game show." (Carson, 5/5); "When Quayle heard it was the 20th anniversary of the Moon Walk he sent Michael Jackson a telegram." (Leno, 7/17);

Top Ten People Targetted on Late Night TV

George Bush	83
Dan Quayle	78
John Tower	58
Ayatollah Khomeini	49
Jim Wright	33
Ronald Reagan	28
Oliver North	24
Joseph Hazelwood	18
Rob Lowe	17
Manuel Noriega	14

"President Bush (in Europe) was greeted by people shouting 'Long live Bush' So apparently the Europeans know all about Dan Quayle too." (Leno, 7/17)

Overheard at George Bush's birthday party: "This gift has special meaning to me, Mr. Quayle, because you colored it yourself."

David Letterman
June 13, 1989

Rejected Defense Secretary nominee John Tower provided a lot of material for comedians during his confirmation hearings (58 jokes): "Personally I'm for John Tower. I like the idea of having a defense department with a happy hour." (Leno, 3/3). Jim Wright's problems as House Speaker were parodied less frequently, but with equal verve: "Most people don't realize what a gifted man he is. That's the problem - most of the gifts haven't been reported." (Leno, 4/17) As for the Ayatollah Khomeini, he remained the butt of jokes as frequently in death as in life: "The Ayatollah was buried face down. They did this so he could see where he was going." (Leno, 6/12);

We also classified jokes by topics rather than individuals. The leader by far was oil spills, which attracted nearly twice as many jokes (160) as any other topic. The main target was Exxon's Alaskan spill: "Yesterday at the beach I held a shell up to my ear and heard a recorded apology from Exxon." (Leno, 6/27); "Last week (Exxon) said that salmon swimming upstream are getting 30% better mileage." (Leno, 5/30) But other jokes were more general, lampooning the oil industry's threats to the environment: "The American Petroleum Institute said today we don't export enough American oil. Oh yeah? Just wait 'til the tide goes out." (Leno, 5/31);

Iran (89), the Tower hearings (63) and Iran-contra (keyed to Oliver North's trial and sentencing) (54) also generated bursts of topical humor, as did the demonstrations in China (50). David Letterman's "Top 10 Chinese Tourist Slogans" (6/15) included, "Free interrogation and beating with valid student ID!" and "When it comes to fun, we beat everybody!" Other steady performers were Crime and Drugs (45) and Congressional ethics (40). In addition to jokes about individuals like Jim Wright and Buz Lukens, the institution took a beating: "The Supreme Court okayed the death penalty for the mentally and morally deficient. I guess this is their way of keeping Congress in line." (Leno, 6/28); "The Home Shopping Network is going to merge with C-SPAN for those who want the convenience of buying a politician in your own home." (Leno, 6/19)

Rounding out the list of top ten topics, there were 29 cracks at baseball, 28 Panama jokes, and 22 jabs at Supreme Court rulings.

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Volume III, Number 7 September 1989

TV's China Syndrome

How the Networks Covered the China Story

How did television news cover the turmoil in China this spring? And how did their crisis reporting compare to coverage in calmer times? We examined 577 stories that the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts aired on China from January 1 through June 30, representing 18 hours 26 minutes of total airtime. In addition, we monitored jokes about China that ran on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night."

Major findings:

■ **Discovering China** - More stories appeared during the month following Gorbachev's May 14 visit than in the entire decade following the 1972 thaw in US-China relations. Gorbachev's five-day visit alone produced more coverage than in all of 1988. *Page 2*

■ **News Follows Anchors** - Led by on-site Dan Rather, CBS aired almost 90 minutes more total footage than ABC and no-show Peter Jennings. *Page 2*

■ **Video Violence** - TV news visuals showed demonstrators committing violence nearly as often as the security forces. *Page 4*

■ **False Spring** - China's good press dropped from 45% positive through May to only 23% positive after the June crackdown. *Page 4*

■ **The Good News Network** - ABC reporters gave far more positive assessments of Chinese state and society than their CBS and NBC colleagues. *Page 5*

Nervous Laughter China was the focus of one in eight topical jokes on late-night TV during the spring crisis. *Page 6*

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Discovering China

This spring American television cameras focused the eyes of the world on China, as Gorbachev's visit spotlighted a month of protests, crises, and eventual government crackdowns. To analyze the changing media images of China, we examined all 527 stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from January 1 through June 30.

That six month period covered President Bush's visit in February, violence in Tibet over Chinese rule in March, student demonstrations beginning in April, Gorbachev's visit in May, and the subsequent tug of war between student protesters and party officials ending with the June massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Until mid May the networks [illegible] than one story per night. Then Gorbachev's visit on May 14 ushered in a month of saturation coverage that concluded when Chinese authorities clamped down on foreign broadcasts in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

How concentrated was the coverage? The networks aired 357 stories in the month from May 14 to June 14, an average of nearly 13 stories per night. That was more stories than they broadcast in the entire decade from 1972 to 1981, when mainland China was "opened" to media inspection after the thaw in U.S. relations.

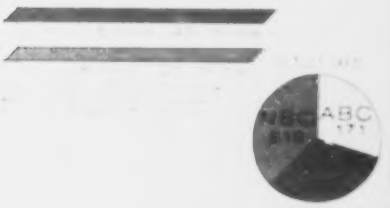
"What a place, what a time, what a story!"

Dan Rather
CBS Evening News

Gorbachev's five day visit in May alone produced half again as many stories as the networks ran in all of 1988 (70 vs. 44).

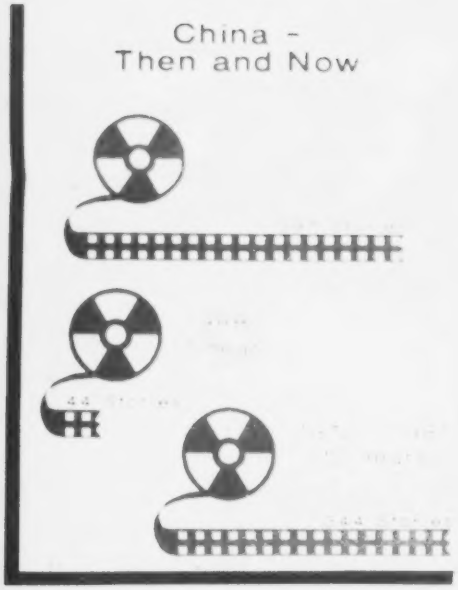
The coverage followed the anchors, as CBS produced the most airtime on China and ABC the least. Led by Dan Rather, in town to cover Gorbachev's Beijing visit, CBS carried 187 stories

Amount of Coverage



with total airtime of 6 hours 48 minutes. Tom Brokaw arrived almost a month after Rather, and NBC carried 6 hours 25 minutes of coverage. The number of stories on NBC actually exceeded CBS's total with 219. Peter Jennings was a no show, and ABC pulled up the rear with only 171 stories and 5 hours 16 minutes of coverage, almost 80 minutes less than on CBS.

China - Then and Now



"What made the crackdown so startling was...the rosy view of China that had been painted by the media."

Tom Shales
Washington Post

Making News

TV news loves action, conflict, and a good real life storyline. So it was no surprise that protests and demonstrations made up the largest categories of topics covered. Peaceful demonstrations were featured in 179 stories, more than the total of all stories on government activities (156). The media became a major part of the story, as the government's efforts to manipulate domestic and foreign media images were featured 73 times. Thus, China's relations with the media were chronicled more often than its relations with either the American or Soviet governments (42 and 45 stories respectively).

Americans got an unusual opportunity to hear from ordinary Chinese reacting to the tumultuous events in their country, as 54 stories focused on public reaction. The Chinese justice system also came under intense scrutiny after the army crackdown; 37 stories aired in a 21 day period.

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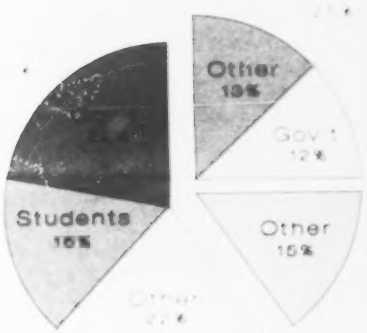
Despite television's reputation for magnifying violent events, violent demonstrations (including those in Tibet) failed to make the "top 10" list, attracting only 32 stories.

Major Topics

State Baker (26) had by far the greatest visibility of U.S. leaders commenting on the events. A substantial minority of non-government sources were Chinese Americans, who made up 3% of the total source list. Other foreign sources accounted for 5% of all citations, led by Soviet leader Gorbachev (13).

Sources



Ordinary People

The networks' presence in China provided a unique opportunity to interview ordinary people and dissidents, as well as the usual government sources. Among 1802 sources quoted, 761 were Chinese, and a solid majority of those were non-government sources. Ordinary citizens, often quoted in man-on-the-street settings or in vignettes about life among the populace, accounted for 22% of all sources. That equalled the exposure given to all government officials and spokesmen, including the government-controlled media. Officials quoted most often were Li Peng (29 times), Deng Xiaoping (19) and Zhao Ziyang (12). The remaining 16% were students involved in protests and demonstrations. If the government-controlled media reports are excluded from the totals, the number of student sources roughly equalled that of government spokesmen. The networks also sought out a variety of dissenting voices. Only 19% of the student sources were identified as "leaders".

An additional one in four individuals quoted were Americans, split about evenly between government and non-government sources. President Bush (32 citations) and Secretary of

> "I can't think of any parallel in human history."
>
> Charles Kuralt
> CBS Sunday Morning

Pictures of Protest

TV news is not only words but pictures. And the pictures in this story were unusually dramatic. To examine the visual aspect of the coverage, we coded every scene shown. In this coding system, the scene changed every time a different camera shot showed a new setting or development. For example, a shot of protesters that cut to another shot of soldiers responding was coded as two scenes. This procedure yielded 10,838 visual scenes of events in China.

The most common scene was one of peaceful protest (2792 visuals), followed by 2520 "contextual" shots establishing the context of events with man-on-the-street interviews, vignettes of life in China, etc. These two categories accounted for almost half of the visuals American audiences saw from China. Pictures of violence, interviews with government officials, and visits by foreign leaders Bush and Gorbachev all fell far behind these totals. In fact, our study demonstrates the degree to which Gorbachev's visit

to Beijing was upstaged by the protesters. The networks showed nearly twice as many pictures of demonstrators as Soviet officials during his visit.

On the other hand, our findings call into question the much noted use of "sign language" by Chinese protesters who carried English or other foreign language signs aimed at the international media. Signs in English showed up on American TV news 19 times in 154 stories (12%) before Gorbachev left Beijing. Such signs appeared only five times out of 183 stories (3%) thereafter, despite the fact that the number of stories showing Chinese language signs increased from 61 to 72. Thus, it appears that the demonstrators planned to appeal to international audiences during Gorbachev's visit, but they did not continue this strategy as their protests spread and a crackdown became imminent.

Finally, and surprisingly, the pictures sometimes contradicted the words of sympathy for the protesters that were often heard from American reporters. Among 127 scenes of one-sided violence portrayed, the demonstrators accounted for nearly half (47%), including throwing stones or Molotov cocktails, fist fights, etc. Security force actions made up a slight majority (53%) of violent scenes, such as firing weapons or driving tanks over demonstrator encampments. (These figures exclude a small number of scenes showing violence by both sides, as well as scenes of protest and violence in Tibet.)

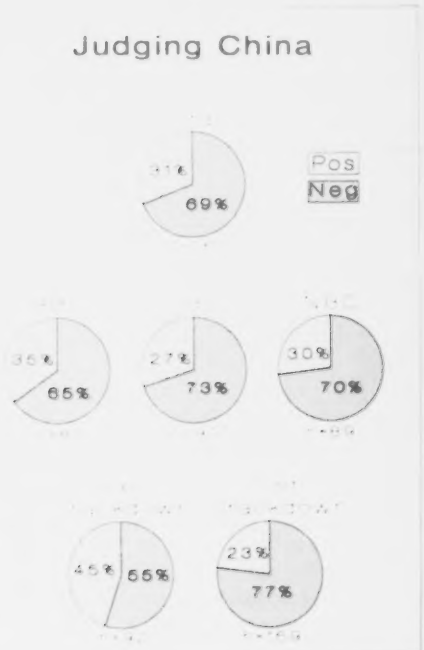
The networks varied in their selection of violent visuals. NBC actually showed more shots of protesters than security forces committing violence (58% to 42%). ABC showed slightly more violence by security forces (52% to 48%), and the spread was greater on CBS - 59% by the security forces and only 41% by the demonstrators.

"Will this be something like Kent State was for our military?"

Eric Engberg
"CBS Nightwatch"

Bejing's False Spring

For China's leaders, an international showcase turned into a public relations disaster. We examined 261 clearly positive or negative statements that reporters and sources directed toward events or policies in China. The result was overwhelmingly negative, by 69% to 31%. But those totals mask a roller-coaster of coverage that followed the dramatic events of the period and the hopes and fears they engendered. Prior to the April 15 death of Hu Yaobang, a hero to the student protesters, assessments were rare (about one per week) but



balanced - 47% positive to 53% negative. At that point the coverage shifted from a context of normalcy to one of crisis. The subsequent demonstrations that continued throughout Gorbachev's visit produced a wave of criticism, with comments running about two to one negative (34% to 66%). Commentary took an upswing during the last two weeks in May, as hopes for reform and restraint were aired while the students occupied Tiananmen Square. During this time positive comments actually outweighed negative ones by 62% to 38%.

China's good press ended on June 3 when the army moved in to crush the demonstrations. During the crackdown (June 3-4) criticism outweighed praise by 85% to 15%, and media judgments remained nearly as negative the rest of the month. Overall, the coverage remained relatively balanced prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre - 45% positive to 55% negative from January 1 through June 2. During the rest

of June, assessments were over three to one negative (77% to 23%).

The most frequent point of criticism concerned the authorities' use of force. It was condemned 52 times and defended only 17 times (75% to 25%). All 69 comments occurred after the army moved in on June 3. And reporters felt unusually free to lend their own authority to the criticism. We coded eight seperate negative statements by reporters on this topic. As NBC's Keith Morrison put it that night, "A lot of people here this morning will be remembering something Chairman Mao once said: 'Whoever suppresses the students will come to no good end.'" But the regime's system of justice received an even higher proportion of bad press (89% negative to 11% positive judgments), mostly during the roundup of dissidents that followed the crackdown. The justice system (including human rights issues) had been evaluated only twice prior to the army's actions.

That level of bad press was about equalled by the 12% positive to 88% negative ratings over the state of China's political system. Tom Brokaw expressed the majority opinion in his June 13 report: "Just ten days ago, [Tiananmen] Square was jammed with people demanding democracy. Now Mao Zedong looks out on a scene only an authoritarian could love."

The regime did better in coverage of its economic affairs, which ran 58% positive to 42% negative. These figures conceal a somewhat negative view of the current state of the economy, which was balanced by positive judgments of the economic reforms that have been instituted. For example, ABC's Richard Threlkeld reported on May 12, "China's people are better off because of Deng's economic reforms." Morever, like so much of the coverage, this distinction was time-sensitive. Most discussion of the economic reforms took place during the period of crisis, while the state of the economy received the most attention before hunger strikes began.

In the political realm, the authorities' best press came on a surprising topic - the imposition of martial law (10 out of 14 positive comments, or 71%). Several government officials and Chinese media spokesmen made the case for using martial law to maintain order, while few critics of the government addressed the issue. A major reason for this imbalance was the critics' fears of speaking out to foreign reporters. On June 12, for example, ABC's Jim Laurie recounted a conversation with one fearful Chinese citizen: "He put his hand over his heart and said, 'In here I know what happened,' but then putting his hand over his mouth, 'but I will never say.'" Indeed, much of the government's good press on all topics came from its own spokesmen. Overall, government controlled sources were 89% positive in their assessments, compared to only 22% among all other Chinese sources, 35% among American reporters, and 24% among all other non-Chinese sources.

The three networks were united in criticizing the regime, but there were some differences in degree. CBS was the most critical, with nearly three to one negative judgments (73% to 27%). On NBC the level of criticism was 70% and on ABC it dropped below two to one at 65% bad press. CBS was also most critical of the authorities' use of force, with only one positive comment in seven (14%), compared to about one in four (24%) on ABC and one in three (33%) on NBC.

These overall distinctions, based on all source comments, were reflected in the judgements voiced by journalists themselves. ABC reporters and anchors offered by far the most positive assessments in the aggregate. Their 20 on-camera evaluations of Chinese policies and events were equally divided between praise and criticism. By contrast, CBS and NBC journalists each offered only three positive evaluations, compared to 18 negative evaluations on CBS and 21 on NBC. Thus, journalists' own assessments of state and society ran six to one negative on CBS and seven to one negative on NBC, in contrast to ABC's even split. The good press on

ABC came early; no network reporter offered any positive assessment after the June 3 crackdown.

Back to the Future

The media engaged in far more speculation than evaluation. Among the favorite topics in the guessing game were the future course of the demonstrations, the government's likely response, the impact on the Communist regime and its relations with the USA. On all these questions, reporters and sources frequently hedged their bets by calling the situation unclear or citing more than one possible outcome. But sometimes they hedged themselves right out of a penetrating insight. For example, Peter Jennings reported on May 26, "we heard a young girl say, 'if Li Peng has more power than the students, we'll be killed.' No American analyst can believe that Li Peng would be so stupid or unfeeling as to resolve the crisis that way."

In the wake of the crackdown, predictions of the system's collapse proved popular. More sources (9) forsaw the death of Communism in China than either a continuation of the status quo or partial liberalization (7). But all these options were dwarfed by the number (17) who pronounced the outcome unclear. Opinion on the future of US-China relations was equally fragmented. Among the 44 forecasts, 9% foresaw improvements, 30% predicted further deterioration, 25% opted for continuation of the status quo, and 36% found the picture too hazy to choose.

LAST LAUGHS

Despite its somber outcome, the China story became a major source of topical humor for comedians on late night television. From May 22 through June 30, 48 China jokes were featured on the opening monologues of NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night." During that time, events in China accounted for one out of every eight jokes on current affairs by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. That made China the fifth most joked-about topic on late-night TV for the first half of 1989, after oil spills, Iran, John Tower's Senate confirmation hearings, and the Iran-contra/Oliver North affair.

Many of the jokes reflected the hopeful days of late May. Thus, Carson admonished an unreceptive audience (5/26), "Do you know how lucky you are? Do you realize there are one million students going to bed in China without any comedy?" Leno had a more ideological comment on May 22: "Communism is a pretty confusing ideology. (Gorbachev) leaves the Soviet Union where there are thousands of starving people and he goes to China where there are thousands of students on a hunger strike." But many of the jokes were apolitical. Letterman claimed (5/24), "The whole thing in China is over, all the students went home. Turned out it was just spring break." And Leno cracked (6/1), "China is the worst place to go on a hunger strike because if you don't eat, an hour later you don't eat again."

The festive air ended after June 3 as Carson and Leno turned to less tragic topics. On "Late Night", however, the humor turned black. Letterman twitted official reluctance to admit to armed intervention with his "Top Ten Announcements by the Chinese Government" (6/21). They included, "the tanks were just here to do a little light moving;" and "there better not be any more protests like the one that didn't take place last month." Most telling though, were his "Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans" (6/15, see box).

David Letterman's Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans

10) We're cracking down on dull vacations!
9) We'll throw another dissident on the barbie!
8) There's an outside chance you'll see Dan Rather clubbed senseless.
7) We'll steal your heart and confiscate your film.
6) Remember how you used to like our cute pandas?
5) Free interrogation and beating with valid student I.D.
4) Visit the Szechuan county fair with special guest star Mac Davis.
3) Democracy: never had it, never will!
2) When it comes to fun, we beat everybody!
1) Ba-boom! Ba-ding! Beijing!